Unbroken

13 STORIES STARRING DISABLED TEENS

EDITED BY

MARIEKE NIJKAMP

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES*–BESTSELLING
AUTHOR OF *THIS IS WHERE IT ENDS*

WILLIAM ALEXANDER · FOX BENWELL · KEAH BROWN
DHONIELLE CLAYTON · CORINNE DUYVIS · HEIDI HEILIG
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Begin Reading

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To every disabled reader, dreamer, storyteller—
We can be heroes.
This one's for us.

The Long Road

HEIDI HEILIG

THERE IT IS—do you hear it?

Hisssss, shhhhh. Hisssss, shhhhh.

The desert wind. Like a serpent sliding through the stones, or my mother warning me not to speak.

Shhhhh, hush, hushhhh. Say nothing. Reflexively, I press my lips together—but everyone who matters already knows my secret.

I should have kept it better, but it's too late now.

The road stretches before me and behind. It is littered with camel dung and pomegranate rinds, wet tea leaves and boiled stew bones. Along it, travelers come and go, west to east and east to west, following the arc of the sun.

And north? If I shade my eyes, I can see the desert from whence the winds come, shifting the dunes of the Takla Makan: the Place of No Return. The haze on the horizon is sand in the air. My father says it can scour the meat from the pale bones of the dead. All travelers whisper about the wind. How, if you get too close, you'll hear it call and bid you come.

I don't hear my name on the wind—only the sound of the sand. The road we travel skirts the edge of the wide wasteland. Perhaps we are at a safe enough distance. Or perhaps the voices are drowned out by the dull ringing of the tangled amulets strung around my neck.

Chung, chung, hisssss. Chung, chung, shhhhh.

Back in my little garden in Xi'an, I used to love the sound of chimes: bone and bamboo and little bronze bells shimmering in the breath of the breeze. A happy sound. Light as the wind. My heart used to beat to their delicate music as I moved through the flowers, taking air and exercise. The sound would make me smile, except on the very worst days.

I haven't smiled in nearly a year. I forgot how to, for a long while. And by the time I remembered, on the road, there wasn't much left to smile about.

The saddle sores on my thighs, the swaying of the camels, and all their

beastly smells. The sun draped heavily across my shoulders, the grit between my teeth. Not to mention the amulets I wear. They are meant to protect me, but they only remind me of what I've lost. And when I walk, I jangle, discordant: a harsh, heavy effigy of an old sweet song. They are heaped thick on my shoulders, the talismans sitting on my chest like a gui ya shen—a ghost's weight—and each step is a chore.

One charm is from my cousin, who said she'd pray for me on my long journey. Another from my older sister, who couldn't look me in the eyes as she slipped the charm over my head. And one from the man who would have been my husband, if the rumors about my bad fate hadn't spread before our wedding.

The rest of the medallions came from my parents. I don't have the heart to tell them they aren't working—especially not after they've taken me such a long way from my garden, with so much farther still to go. Besides, would they want to know how I feel? *Shhhhh, hushhhh, say nothing.* But the truth is a powerful force—relentless and dangerous as the wind. It's what has pushed us here, like dead leaves to the edge of the desert.

The road we travel is not my father's typical route—and I am not his typical cargo. He is a silk trader between Xi'an and Dunhuang. Or he was, before. And my mother used to keep our books. She, like I, had never been beyond the walls of the city. This is the farthest any of us have traveled, and we're not even halfway to Persia.

What will we find there? I hardly dare dream. I want it to be beautiful—but most of all, I want it to be worth the journey. An end to the travel—and to my tribulations. A garden, perhaps, but one where I can flower and grow. But can I, a girl from Xi'an, take root in such foreign soil? If not, what then? I wasn't thriving in our little garden, either.

I shake the thought out of my head. We are far from that fate and getting farther all the while. And up ahead, somewhere on the road: the point past which it is longer to travel back home than to go forward into the unknown. Already, miles and miles of dust lie between me and my old life. But the distance was not the difficulty—that life was no longer mine. There was a wall now stronger than the one built by the first emperor: the diagnosis.

My parents had risked two doctors to treat me—one we'd known for years, who knew our family and all its secrets—and another who might have had better news. I still think he was the one who let the rumor slip. I only told my sister—and she would never have shared the truth with anyone outside our family, not when it brought her as much shame as it brought me. Then

again, my bad fate might have been obvious in my unstoppable tears or my uncontrollable laughter, the unseemly flirting or the weeks spent in bed, the times I went out with coins to spend on rice and came back with ribbons for my hair.

These days, my fate is obvious in the heaped strands of amulets around my neck—but less so, every step we travel. Because in the west, bad fate can be treated.

I hear they don't even wear amulets there—that the treatments are simple but effective. At least, that's the claim on which my parents sold everything to make the journey to Persia. I am lucky; I know that much. I have another cousin, back in Xi'an. One I've never met—never seen—who herself never sees the light of day. I imagine her sometimes, as pale as the mushrooms that spring up at night only to crack and wither in the sun.

Is her fate as bad as mine? Certainly my fortune is better, because I have a chance for treatment. For freedom.

If we can make it past the Place of No Return.

How long have we traveled? Weeks, months. So far, at least, it has been more tedious than dangerous—or is that only the bent of my mind, convincing me nothing has happened when everything is different? I know I have seen more than I ever thought I would—ugly and beautiful, all thrown together. The green fields, where white herons watch their own reflections till the silence is broken by the jeering laughter of rough men. Or the carcasses of unlucky pack animals, ridden too hard, rotting under the clear and glorious sky. Or the long sweep of poplars to the south of the road, their green arms holding back the wasteful desert.

And the shocking emerald gems of the oases where we stop for the night.

I love the camps, and I hate them. They are a place to rest—to eat—sometimes even to wash away the dust and sweat of the road. But they are also places where traders gather from all corners, and I am not used to so many strangers. They aren't exactly frightening, but they are much too friendly for a girl with secrets to keep. And their usual questions—What is your cargo? Where are you bound?—are not so easy to answer. And then, of course, there are those who already know what the amulets mean.

The stares were worse closer to home—we'd left in the dead of night to avoid them, but even on the road outside of Xi'an, everyone knew. Since passing Dunhuang, though, the looks have softened from suspicion and scorn to a milder curiosity. But I still remember what it was like—the prickling skin, the chill in my flesh, the dizzy heart-pounding feel of being known as

mad.

But there's nothing for it—at least, not until the journey's done. For now, night is falling as it always does, and we are nearing the next camp. Miloo, my camel, always smells the water first. I can't imagine how, when the pungent scent of her own fur still makes my eyes sour. But I've gotten to know her signals—the way her strides lengthen when she senses there is food ahead—and so when she starts to stretch, I watch out for the greenery.

Soon enough it appears: a bright emerald burst against the dun-colored landscape. As the sun sinks, we approach the little camp. Nestled in the curve of the spring, squat buildings rattle like dice in a cup. A little frontier town, gambling with fortune on the edge of the world.

"It's called Niya," my father tells me. His smile is hopeful—his white teeth strange in his dust-coated face. Then the smile falters a little. "Or at least, that's what they tell me."

My father knew his old route like he knew my mother's face—comfortable in his familiarity but in love anew every time he saw it. I'm not used to seeing him out of his element, but none of us know the way anymore.

I try to smile back, my lips still pressed together. My mother watches me, but I do not open my mouth. At last she sighs. "Do they say whether there are baths?"

"There must be," my father says. "And lamb and hot bread and pomegranates, too."

"Flowers in gardens," my mother plays along.

"And hua mei, singing under the trees," my father replies, his grin returning.

My parents look at me sideways, waiting for me to join in. This is a game—we all used to play it. A dreaming game, where you give voice to your heart's desire, and in that way come close enough to imagine it. I don't dare—not anymore. It feels too frivolous—too risky—so the only sounds are the chime of my amulets and the tread of our camels' hooves.

The day is cooling under the purple dusk as we make our way into the camp. Tents and yurts and even some shacks spread across the scrubby grass near the bank. Many spots are already taken by travelers who made better time coming from the last oasis, or people coming from the east. Food is cooking at little fires and at a bigger, more permanent kitchen—an enterprising family serving the traders. The smells make my mouth water. Someone somewhere is playing a spike-fiddle, someone else is eating a pomegranate, spitting the seeds into the dirt: *pthoo, pthoo*.

My father goes to get water, and my mother seeks out the camp cook to inquire about food. I slide down from my camel with a clanging jangle that turns heads.

Shame creeps across my face, but I try to tamp it down. I know what I must look like—my shirt is plastered to my skin with sweat and dust, and the amulets make a thick mat across my chest, like the web of a spider with insects trapped inside. But all of us here are strangers—east and west mingling with a smattering of north and south, and when I take a deep breath, I swear I can taste the moisture in the air. At the very least, I know I don't smell as bad as Miloo.

I set to making camp—unrolling the oilcloth, spreading the tarp, driving the stakes. I've gotten better at it—quicker—though the process still leaves me breathing hard, with the amulets swaying and dragging like a yoke.

Chung, chung. Chung—pthoo!

Chung, chung. Chung—pthoo!

Someone is still staring at me; I can see her out of the corner of my eye—she's got sun-darkened skin and a mocking smile, half-hidden behind a red fistful of fruit. Her scrutiny makes my skin crawl as the seeds land in the dust near my feet. I ignore her until she speaks.

"What are those?"

She used the language of the traders—east and west mixed together and then shortened, smoothed into sounds we all can manage. But her inflection is eastern—has she lived where I'm heading? I want to ask, but I've learned my lesson. My mouth stays shut.

Chung, chung, pthoo. Chung, chung—

"You've angered the gods."

Despite the heat of the fading day, I am suddenly cold. She knows—of course she knows. I straighten up quickly, gaping at her, but she only smiles. I blink once, twice, then flee into the tent.

I do not come outside to eat, and my mother, worried, brings my dinner inside—warm bread with lamb gravy. I see the concern on her face. "What's on your mind, Lihua?" she asks, and even though we're alone inside, I'm not ready to tell her. I'm not ready to say anything.

Still, she sits beside me while I eat, her hands in her lap. The ink that used to stain her fingers is fading, replaced by grit and grime under her nails. My mother used to have porcelain skin—untouched by the sunlight. Now it is turning gold in the desert light. Does she miss her old life? I know she must. I do, and it's my fault we had to leave it. But she never says so, and I never ask.

I can’t.

After dinner, we bundle up, my mother and father joking, laughing, but it is forced between them, and I am silent. I am still silent long after they have gone to sleep, long after the spike-fiddler has stopped playing, even after the camels have stopped groaning and chewing. Still, I am awake. The amulets jostle whenever I try to burrow down into the blankets. Finally, just when I’m comfortable, I realize I have to visit the pits.

We passed them on the way in—they’re downwind of the camp and far from the water. The night air is cold in the desert—I can see my breath when I step out of the tent—but I just wrap my coat tighter around my shoulders and start toward the swale.

The moon is bright, and the night is quiet but for the jingle jangle of my shame. A flash of anger—no less fiery for being familiar: I wish I could tear the whole lot of them from my neck and leave them in the pit. But I don’t. Of course I don’t. I want to be well. Even if it doesn’t feel like they are helping.

On the way back to my tent, I walk slowly—carefully—trying to keep quiet. Placing one foot in front of the other—one foot in front of the other—so focused on my feet that I’m startled to find a person in my path.

The girl.

I stiffen as she smiles, but the mockery in her face is gone—softened by the shadows. And with her red-stained hand, she reaches up and pulls something from inside her shirt. The moonlight glints off an amulet.

It’s shaped like an eye, similar to one of my own—an amulet my father had traded for. And the chill I feel now has nothing to do with the desert air. Before I can stop them, the words escape my lips. “You too?”

She nods, and suddenly I have a hundred thousand questions bubbling up on my tongue. I’ve never met another person with bad fate—much less someone who would tell me so themselves. I’ve only heard rumors. Hushed references, memories spoken in past tense, as of the dead, but without the reverence. I stare at this girl—chin high in the moonlight—smiling as though her fate were not a burden. Could I ever be so bold? I open my mouth, but the wind picks up—*shhhhh*, *husshhhhhh*—and I hesitate, so she speaks.

“Aren’t they heavy?” She nods to my necklaces and takes my grimace for an answer. “Why do you wear so many?”

I want to answer, but it’s hard to speak, even now. My mouth feels dry, so I wet my lips, then swallow the grit on my tongue. “The more the better, they say.”

“What do you say?” she asks immediately, and I blink at her, considering

the question.

“Not much.”

Her lips quirk, but I hadn’t meant it as a joke.

“Who am I to argue with the doctors?” I say quickly. “I just want to be well.”

An expression flits across her face—something I can’t quite catch. “You’re heading west?”

“To Persia,” I say.

She nods, as though she’d guessed already. “That’s where I’m from.”

“What’s it like?”

“Good food.” Her eyes sparkle, but I’m not amused.

“I wasn’t asking about the food.”

She laughs—so loud in the night. Near the trough, the camels shift their weight. “It’s better than in the east, or so I hear. I’ve never been to your country, but I’ve met people who’ve fled. Cursed ones, like we are,” she adds, but in her voice it is a sisterhood rather than a conspiracy. “They come from all around, if they can afford to. All for the treatment.”

“And … what is the treatment?”

“Clean living,” she says simply. Then she looks me up and down. “Bad hygiene insults the gods.”

My eyes narrow—I get the impression she’s teasing me, and I’m suddenly very aware of the stains on my shirt and the sweat in my hair. Then again, it might just be the limits of our shared language—the trader’s tongue is a narrow bridge. And could that be why the amulets haven’t worked? “What does it mean? Clean living?”

“Exercise. Baths. Fresh air. Fruit. Easy enough to keep up on the road.” She looks at her fingernails, still red with juice. “Except for the baths.”

“Why did you leave?”

“Money,” she says simply. “We’re taking a load of linen east. Clean living isn’t cheap.”

“I know that.” I press my lips together, remembering all that we had to sell to come this far. How much farther did we have to go? “How long does it take?”

“What do you mean?”

“The treatment. Till you’re cured.”

Her eyebrows lift like wings. “Cured? No. There is no cure.”

“What?” My stomach twists. “But I thought—”

“There is no cure,” she says again. “The treatment is forever.”

“Forever?” I feel dizzy, so I sit heavily on the grass. My amulets clang. She kneels down beside me—a soft hand on my shoulder.

“Not so terrible, is it? At least, not as terrible as it could be.”

“But I’ll never be normal.”

“Normal?” She laughs. “What is that?”

I look at her, disbelieving—but in her face, I see something reflected: a memory of something else, something terrible. What else has she seen? *Shhhhh, hushhhh*. I look out at the desert, the sand sliding on the dunes, and the long road, silvered by the moon. My garden is back there somewhere. I’ve never felt farther from home, though we’re not even halfway to Persia.

“Didn’t you have another life, before all this? Something you want to go back to?”

The girl cocks her head. “It is all my life. Just different times.”

My heart slows. Perhaps we don’t have much in common after all. Suddenly I am so tired. I feel myself sinking into the sandy earth. Desperate, I look for hope. “Does it help, at least?”

“The treatment? A little.” Her voice is much softer now—she reaches out and brushes one of the amulets on my chest. “More than these do, anyway.”

“Then why do you wear one?” I say quickly. Then I feel it—a flush in my cheeks at my own rudeness. It’s been too long since I spoke—I am out of practice.

The girl only smiles, tucking her own amulet back into her shirt. “Because even if it doesn’t work, it reminds me that someone I love wishes it did. You must have a lot of people who love you.”

I look down at the mass of necklaces and take a deep breath under their weight—*chung, chung*. “This isn’t how I want to be reminded.”

The girl shrugs, as though she couldn’t say either way.

“Do you want to know what helps me most? More than amulets, more than clean living?”

I look up at her then, meeting her eyes. “Yes. Please.”

“Talking. Finding others like me. You’ll meet more on the journey.”

Is she lying? I consider it—do I feel better now, or worse? Worse, knowing there is no cure. But I would have learned that eventually. And it is better knowing I’m not alone. Still, I don’t know if I’m ready to tell her that, not just yet. Instead I make a face and grip the strands of my necklaces. “If this is a journey, I am a pack animal.”

“Let go of what doesn’t work, and find out what does. Try the exercise, maybe.” She wrinkles her nose. “And the baths.”

I laugh then—the first time in a while—and the sound is too loud in the dark. Camels shift on their feet, and the cool air rings. “Have to get past the Takla Makan first.”

“The garden of the desert,” she says then. “We named it after the poplars, you know. Takli.”

I frown at her. “In Xi’an, we say it means the Place of No Return.”

“Taqlar?” She shakes her head and helps me to my feet. “The sound is similar, but the meanings are very different.”

* * *

The next morning I look for the girl, but I can’t find her. I wake slowly, eat slowly, pack slowly, but it is still early when we have to leave, and she has not yet come out of her tent.

Did I only imagine her, or will we meet again on the journey? If we do, I will have to ask her name.

The sun is bright but not yet overwhelming as we leave the oasis and travel down the road. Our shadows fly before us like arrows, as the camels fall into their steady pace, Father first, then Mother, and me behind.

Chung, chung, chung, chung. As we travel, I work my fingers into the knotted tangle, pulling one of the strands over my head. A piece of carved bone, warm on my palm. The piece my sister gave me. I bite my lip as I remember her expression—her eyes everywhere but on my face. As though what I had might leap through the air and take her by the throat if she looked me in the eye. This is not a memory I want to hang around my neck. And as the camel walks, I let the charm slide free, down into the sand.

Chung, chung, thump.

The next is a smooth wooden frog. Had I ever wanted to marry the merchant? Or was I only wedded to the idea of the life I’d expected?

Chung, chung, thoomp.

One by one I lift the amulets off my shoulders—a bit of brass, a rounded stone, a silk packet of faded herbs—and as they fall away into the dust, I am lighter with every step. I take a deep breath of fresh air—not better, not yet, but freer. I pull them off, piece by piece, lifting away the weight, until there is one left—one from my parents, shaped a little like an eye.

That one rests against my heart—a memento of their watchful care. I feel so light. A laugh bubbles up on my tongue, and Miloo senses it like she senses water. She stretches her long legs with a ridiculous groan, and I am laughing in earnest now as the wind takes my hair. Suddenly we are flying west as the

road stretches away before and behind, and all I can hear is the sound of my heart racing.

“Lihua!” My father’s voice tugs me back; I pull on the rope and Miloo slows. Using the reins, I turn her in a circle to wait as my parents urge their own camels toward me. My father’s brow is furrowed at first, but a smile tugs at my mother’s lips when she sees my own. “Where are your amulets?” he calls, but he has already turned his eyes to the long road behind us, as though he knows I will not answer.

“I only need one,” I call back, and my voice is rusty but loud. “The others slow me down, and I’m eager to get to Persia.”

His head snaps up, and suddenly he is the one at a loss for words. But my mother kicks her camel forward, till she is eye-to-eye with me. “Understandable,” my mother says carefully. “What do you think we’ll find there?”

“Good food,” I say impulsively, and my father laughs then.

“Peacocks, too,” he adds. “And fountains.”

“Beautiful baths,” my mother says with longing.

“And people like me,” I add, and their smiles only deepen as they catch up. I take one last look east—back toward Xi’an—before I turn to join them, side by side as we journey on the long road.

Britt and the Bike God

KODY KEPLINGER

I'VE ALWAYS LOVED the climbs.

I love the pain in my legs. The feel of the handlebars gripped tightly beneath my gloved palms. My feet on the pedals, spinning and spinning and spinning as I tell myself that it's just a little bit farther, whether that's true or not. And then, just when I think I can't keep this up, the path begins to flatten out. And then it slopes downward.

And that's when I get to fly.

"Thank God," Lorna rasped from the captain's seat of the tandem. "I'm dying."

I balanced my feet on the pedals and pushed upward, standing with my hands still on the handlebars. I laughed as the wind whipped past, glad to relieve some of the pressure from my aching backside.

"Are you even tired?" Lorna demanded, then added, "Turning right," as we coasted around a bend in the path.

"You should probably go ahead and change gears," I reminded her. "And I'm *a little* tired."

She scoffed.

"To be fair, I've been riding this loop with Dad for years," I told her. "I'm pretty used to Puckett Hill. Keep riding with us and you'll get there."

"We'll see," she said. "Gears should be good. I'm about to start pedaling again."

I felt it when her feet began to move, and I tried to match her pace. It was slower than what I was used to, but that was okay. Lorna was new to the club, and at least I didn't feel like I was holding her back.

That was one of the challenges of riding a tandem bike. It was easy for someone to not pull their weight. Or to push too hard and overpower their partner. The captain and the stoker have to find the right balance of speed and resistance. And, most important, communication.

Especially when the stoker—the person riding in back—can't see.

We started coasting again, and I knew we were getting close to the park benches where the rest of the cycling club would be waiting for us.

"Don't forget to count us down," I said, "when we're going to stop."

"Right," Lorna said. "Thanks for the reminder. Okay. In three … two … one."

I put my foot down as the bike came to a halt. I hopped off the stoker's seat and stretched before turning toward the benches. I only saw Dad when his pale face, slightly pink with sunburn, was hovering a couple of feet in front of me. He held out my cane and a cold bottle of water.

"Thank you," I said, taking both from him.

"How was the ride?" he asked.

"Good. We did two loops, so about fourteen miles. Lorna is a good partner."

"I don't know about that," Lorna said. I couldn't see her, but when she spoke, I realized she was standing just to my left. And based on the swigging sound after her words, Dad had handed her a water bottle, too.

"I'm sure Britt's telling the truth," Dad said. "We're glad to have you in the club, Lorna. And now that everyone's back, I better go make sure we're all prepped for the big ride tomorrow. Excuse me."

When he was gone, I turned to Lorna. "I wasn't lying, you know. You are a good captain. Usually it takes me much longer to train the newbies."

Like a lot of the people in our cycling club, Lorna was a student at the local college. I'd only met her for the first time a few weeks earlier, when she'd showed up to one of our meetings at the park. Gabe, one of the other cyclists, had a class with her and had invited her to join. She may have been our newest member, but she really was fitting in pretty well.

She smiled. "Thanks, Britt." She paused and raised a tanned arm to wipe sweat from her forehead before saying, "Can I ask you something?"

"You just did, but sure."

"Is it scary? To ride in the back? I feel like it would freak me out to not have control of the bike."

"Well, when you can't see, the idea of having control of the bike freaks you out a little more."

"Fair point, I guess."

"I get what you're asking, though," I said, tucking my water bottle under my arm so I could use my free hand to unhook the chinstrap of my helmet. "And it used to. Back when I had more vision. I would sit on the stoker's seat

and try to turn the handlebars. I kept forgetting that I couldn't actually do that. But I got used to it."

"You're brave," Lorna said.

"I'm not," I assured her, trying not to bristle. I hated being called brave. It was almost as bad as *inspiring*. "It's not bravery. I just really like bikes."

That was an understatement. Mom used to joke that I'd come out of the womb pedaling, and the reality wasn't too far off.

Dad had been into cycling since he was a teenager, so the minute I was big enough, he bought my first tricycle. It wasn't long before I got my first real bike, and only a few months after that that the training wheels came off. By the time I was seven, Dad was taking me out to the local bike path with him every day.

I wasn't the fastest or the strongest, and, usually, I didn't mind. It wasn't about being the best for me. It was about that rush when I coasted down a big hill after a challenging climb. About the satisfaction of aching leg muscles the next day. It all felt like home. For me, cycling felt as natural as walking.

So when my vision first started to go, not being able to ride anymore was my biggest fear.

"We'll deal with it as it comes," Dad had promised me.

And for a while, it came slowly. Retinitis pigmentosa is gradual, but persistent. First to go were the night rides. Even with the lights along the bike path in Kuehn Park, it was too dark for me to see well enough to ride safely anymore. So Dad and I started riding in the mornings. And that worked for a while. But then the edges of my vision begin to creep inward. My field of vision steadily narrowed, until I was missing turns and not noticing other cyclists off to my left and right.

And that's when Dad brought home Tandy.

Tandy was not your typical tandem bike. She wasn't like the big, clunky things you see cute older couples riding on vacation. No. Tandy was a road bike. Slim and light and fast. She was a beautiful hunk of metal, and she's what kept me pedaling—sight be damned.

It's been three years since Tandy and I got together. She is my prized possession.

"How many miles did you get in?"

I turned and found myself almost nose to nose with Andre. He smiled at me, a grin so big and bright even the blind girl couldn't miss it. It spread wide across his face, stretching the dark brown skin of his cheeks and causing his eyes to nearly disappear. I didn't normally notice this much about other

people's smiles, but I'd spent way too much time using what little vision I had left looking at Andre.

Not that I was going to let him know that.

"Fourteen," I said. "Just two laps. We got started a little late, though. What about you? Seventy miles?"

"I'm not *that* fast," he said.

"Sixty-three, then?"

"Twenty-eight," he said. "Four laps."

"Oh no," I teased. "Slow day. You'll get 'em next time, Dre."

He touched my arm when he laughed, and I thought I was going to die. Luckily, Lorna spoke up, distracting Andre from the fact that I was seconds away from melting into a puddle on the sidewalk.

"Andre," she said. "You help with the bike maintenance, right?"

"Oh yeah," he said. "Sorry, Lorna. I was being rude. Hope you had a good ride, too."

"I did," she said, a hint of amusement in her voice.

"And thanks for reminding me. I was coming over to ask—is everything good with Tandy? She ready for tomorrow's ride?"

"For the most part," I said. "The gears were jumping a little bit, but nothing too bad."

"I'll take a look just to be safe," he said. "I don't want her giving us any problems tomorrow."

"Andre!" I recognized the voice as belonging to Sid, Andre's roommate and one of the other cyclists in our little club. I couldn't see him, but it sounded like he was a few yards away, off on the other side of the benches. "Did you stick that extra patch kit in your backpack?"

"Yeah," Andre called back. "Just a second and I'll grab it." He turned back to me. "See you guys tomorrow. It's gonna be great."

"Bye, Andre," Lorna said.

"Later," I said.

Two years ago, Dad had decided to start a cycling club. Partly because he liked riding with other people, but I think it mostly had to do with me. My high school didn't have any blind-friendly sports, and while I loved riding with my dad, sometimes I wished I had real teammates. People close to my age who loved the same sport I did. We lived in a college town full of cyclists, so it just sort of made sense.

A few of our members were older men and women, bike enthusiasts like Dad, but most were like Lorna, Sid, and Andre—college students. It was a

mix of avid cyclists and newcomers just looking for a way to stay active. We accepted everyone. No skill level required. All we asked was that they let me teach them how to captain a tandem bike and, if they felt comfortable with it, volunteered to captain for me every once in a while.

Andre had joined about a year ago, at the start of his freshman year at the local university. And he was *good*. I'd been riding since I was a kid, but I was nowhere near as fast as Andre. He was by far the fastest on our team, which had won him a lot of favor with Dad. And the admiration of basically everyone else.

He was also a total bike nerd. After riding with us for about three months, he worked up the nerve to tell Dad that the mechanic everyone was paying to service our bikes was ripping us off. He wasn't fixing them properly so we'd just have to keep coming back to him. So Dad offered to pay him to take care of our bikes—and ask the rest of the club to hire him, too. Andre agreed. Our bikes had never been better.

Basically he was a nineteen-year-old Bike God.

A really attractive nineteen-year-old Bike God.

"So," Lorna said once Andre had walked away. "When's the wedding?"

"What? Never. No. Shut up." I hoped that if anyone saw the blush creeping up my face, they'd just excuse it as a side effect of exercise.

She giggled but was quickly drowned out by Dad's voice.

"Listen up, guys," he said. "Tomorrow is the annual Lake Sussman ride, and all of you who signed up are now registered. As you know, there are three different course lengths, and we've got riders in all three. Start time is at nine a.m., but we should get there by eight at the latest. If you're driving yourself, let me know, and I will make sure you have directions. Otherwise, be at my house by six to ride in the van. Talk to Andre if your bike needs anything before tomorrow morning. And remember, guys. This isn't a race; it's just a ride. So let's keep it fun. Barbecue at my house afterwards."

A few people cheered at that last bit.

I turned to Lorna and grinned. "So will I be riding with you tomorrow?"

"Sorry, Britt," she said. "You said you were gonna do the fifty-mile course, and I just … cannot handle that yet. I'm nervous about the twenty. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," I said. "I wonder who Dad put me with, then."

Captains usually worked on a volunteer basis, and the same handful of people typically agreed to ride with me. Lorna, though new, was one of them. Sometimes Dad would just pick someone at random, which I hated because I didn't want anyone to feel forced to ride with me. I'd told him that several

times, but he didn't change the system. He refused to let me be left out just because no one volunteered. "Besides," he always said, "no one minds riding with you at all. They'd tell me if it was a problem."

But of course they wouldn't. He was my dad. Even if they acted cool about it, I was sure that, inside, they were frustrated and resentful.

"Ready to go, kid?" Dad asked a minute later.

"All set," I said. "But quick question. Lorna says she's doing the twenty-mile, so does that mean Gabe is riding with me tomorrow?"

"No. Gabe's not doing the ride. I think he said his sister's getting married."

"Oh. Well, then who is my captain?"

"Right, I forgot to tell you. You're riding with Andre."

It felt like I'd been hit in the gut with a baseball bat. I wanted to be sick. Or maybe just to cry a little. Because doing a long-distance ride with Andre was literally the last thing I wanted.

I flashed back to our conversation about Tandy a few minutes earlier. When he'd said he didn't want her to give us problems, I'd assumed *us* meant the team as a whole. But no. Oh God, he'd meant us, as in me and him, on a fifty-mile bike ride.

Don't get me wrong, the idea of an afternoon spent with Andre, mostly alone, near a pretty lake? That sounded like a dream. Spending that day on a bike with him, though, was a nightmare.

I'd trained Andre to captain just like everyone else, but other than that lesson, I'd only really ridden with him once on one of the other annual rides a few months earlier. Dad had asked him to captain for me because none of my usual partners could, and Dad himself was feeling a little sick and wasn't up to doing one of the longer courses. Andre, being a nice dude, had agreed, but it had been a disaster.

First, we had a hard time getting in sync. His legs moved faster than mine, so my feet kept slipping off the pedals. And I hate using shoe clips—I always have trouble getting in and out of them when I kick off or stop—so when he offered to let me use his, I'd said no. Then, in our effort to find a pace that worked for us both, we kept switching gears. Eventually the chain fell off, and we had to pull over to fix it. That was when I could tell he was getting frustrated. He didn't say anything. He was too much of a gentleman for that. But he did get very quiet, which was almost worse. When we finally got going again, I could tell he was slowing himself down for me.

I was a good cyclist, but I rarely averaged more than fourteen or fifteen miles an hour. Andre was a speed demon. He was probably used to being the

first one to finish every ride. And while we hadn't been in an actual race, people obviously still compared times. We hadn't had the worst time, but we were far from the front of the pack.

I could tell he was disappointed, and he barely spoke to me the rest of the day. Later, when I'd tried to approach him to apologize for how things had gone, I overheard him talking to Sid.

"How was the ride with Britt?"

Andre had groaned. "A mess. I don't think I've ever ridden that bad."

After hearing this, I'd turned around, too embarrassed to say anything.

Being a burden was the last thing I wanted. I felt like one a lot since losing my sight. Like I was inconveniencing the people around me. I felt like I was constantly working my ass off to keep up, to require as little assistance as possible. Not just in cycling, but every day. It was exhausting. And with Andre, I felt like I'd failed. I'd held him back. He'd had a miserable time because of me, and I didn't want to do it again.

But it didn't seem like I had much of a choice. If Dad had picked Andre, that meant no one else had volunteered, and riding with Dad wasn't an option. He'd agreed to be on van duty, ready to drive out and help anyone who might get stranded along the path. At least one of our bikes always broke down, and you had to have someone who knew what they were doing at the ready. This time it was Dad's turn.

Which meant that I was stuck with Andre.

Or, more accurately, he was stuck with me.

* * *

It's funny how when you are dreading something, it seems to come faster. It's like the opposite of biking up a hill. When you're doing a climb, you want to get to the top so badly, but it seems forever away. But when it's something you don't want, it rushes toward you.

Before I knew it, 6 a.m. was upon us, and I found myself piled into the van with Dad and about half our cyclists. We had a trailer hitched to the back, housing our bikes, and the interior of the van smelled like coffee and bagels.

Andre wasn't riding with us. Sid had a car, so they were driving up to Lake Sussman together. Thank God for small mercies, I guess. The idea of spending two hours trapped in the van with him, knowing he was dreading the ride as much as I was, would have been torture.

Andre was waiting for us when we got there, though. He didn't say much to me before the start time. He was busy checking everyone else's bikes, but I

had a feeling he was probably avoiding me, too. I would never forgive Dad for this. He was seriously ruining the love life I'd invented in my head.

A voice came over a speaker, announcing that we'd be starting in fifteen minutes, and cyclists from other teams and clubs began getting into place. That's when Andre finally came over to me. He had on that big, dorky smile I loved. I appreciated the front he was putting on. It was just like him to try to make the best of this. But it only made me resent Dad even more for putting him in this position.

"Ready to go, Britt?"

"Sure," I said. "I'm … ready when you are."

I pulled my helmet on over my short hair, then took Andre's arm as he led me over to Tandy. Together we wheeled the bike toward the starting area. Once he was settled in the captain's seat, I climbed on the back. In theory, we should have been a good fit to be tandem partners. We were almost the same height—I'm on the tall side for a girl—but I was a little bit lighter, which helped when you were a stoker.

In practice, though …

The kickoff was a bit of a mess. I was so in my head that I didn't even hear him counting down for me. He pushed off the ground and I didn't. The pedals began spinning while my startled feet scrambled. We lost balance and had to try again. Something that almost never happened to me with other captains.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"It's okay."

But it wasn't. People were already zooming past us. Five seconds in and I was already messing things up for Andre.

The second attempt was a success, at least. And once we got going, things went smoothly. At least for a while. Andre's legs definitely moved faster than what I was used to, but I was able to match them at first.

We sped around corners and powered up hills, overtaking several other cyclists along the way. I loved imagining their faces when they realized the bike that had just zoomed past them was a tandem. Especially since most of them had probably seen us at the starting line and chuckled or thought, *That's cute*. No one took tandem riders seriously—until you showed them how much faster you were.

But I couldn't keep this kind of speed up for much longer. And I guess my fatigue was showing in how hard I was pedaling, because about thirty minutes into the ride, Andre said, "If I'm going too fast or if you want me to change gears or anything, just let me know."

“No … no,” I said, though it came out through ragged breaths. “I’m fine. Just … ride like you would if you were alone.”

“But I’m not alone.”

“I know, but … don’t worry about me. I can … I can keep up.”

He didn’t buy it, though. Andre slowed down, almost by half. So slow that it only took a minute for a few cyclists to pass us. I was embarrassed. Was this how slow I seemed to him? Was this the pace he thought I could handle?

I pressed harder, forcing the pedals to spin faster. The thing about tandem bikes is either the captain or the stoker can really change the pace. Whoever is pedaling hardest takes control, which is why it’s important to find a partner you can get a good rhythm with.

Typically, I just tried to match the pace of whoever my captain was, which wasn’t usually that difficult. Most of the time I was the one slowing myself down a bit for the comfort of my partner. I liked it that way. That I could be an asset rather than a hindrance. It wasn’t possible with Andre.

We couldn’t seem to find a pace that worked. We’d go too fast, then too slow. While I tried to prove how hard I could push and how quickly my legs could spin, he was trying to set a speed he thought would be comfortable for me—a snail’s pace. Eventually, we were both confused and annoyed.

And I heard him in my head over and over, telling Sid what a mess the last time had been. How, with me, he’d ridden worse than he ever had.

“I’m sorry,” I kept saying as other cyclists passed us. “I’m sorry … I’m sorry.”

And then things got worse.

We were on a flat stretch when I noticed that something felt off. Tandy wasn’t riding as smoothly as usual, and a second later I heard hissing from just behind me.

“We need to check the back tire,” I said.

“Crap. Okay. Stopping in three … two … one.”

We came to a stop at the edge of the road, right along a grass-covered hill. I hopped off the stoker’s seat and reached out to touch the back tire. Sure enough, it was almost flat. I groaned.

“It’s fine,” Andre said. “I’ve got a hand pump and a patch kit in my backpack. Just give me a … oh. Damn it.”

“What?”

I could hear him rustling through the contents of his backpack as he muttered to himself. “Damn it. Damn it. I can’t believe…”

“What?” I asked again.

“So … I don’t actually have that pump.” He sighed. “I must have left it in Sid’s car. I’ve got a patch, but that won’t do us any good unless we can put some more air in the tire.”

“Oh.”

“Let me call your dad. He can bring something out here.”

I pulled off my helmet and sat down in the grass next to the road while Andre walked off. I could hear him talking on the phone now, his voice full of annoyance and frustration. I couldn’t blame him. As if riding with me wasn’t bad enough, now my bike had a flat, and we were stuck here until help came. This was definitely not how he’d wanted today to go, and it was all because he’d been forced to ride with me.

“I’m sorry,” I said when Andre got off the phone. He came over and sat next to me in the grass. I was glad he was on my left now, where I couldn’t see him.

“Why do you keep saying that?” he asked. “You’re not the one who forgot to pack a pump.”

“Yeah, but it’s my bike.”

“That … still doesn’t make sense,” he said. “Unless you poked a hole in the tire when I wasn’t looking.”

“No. Obviously. I’m just…” My fingers twisted in the grass, pulling a few blades loose. “I’m just sorry you got stuck with me.”

There was a long pause; then, in a quiet voice, he asked, “Why would you say that?”

“Say what?”

“That I got *stuck* with you.”

“Because you did. No one volunteered to captain, so Dad asked you.” I kept my eyes down. Never before had I been so grateful for tunnel vision. All I could see were the tops of my shoes. “And it was very sweet of you to agree, even though I know it’s annoying. I hate … *hate* feeling like a burden.”

“A … burden?”

“You don’t have to pretend. I’m not clueless, Andre.”

“All right, but maybe I am.” I felt his hand touch my shoulder. He’d taken off his gloves, and despite myself, I shivered at the feel of his skin on mine. “Britt, look at me. Why do you think you’re a burden?”

I sighed, and slowly turned to face him. “It was pretty clear last time we rode together. You were so frustrated, and I get it. I’m not as fast as you.”

“It wasn’t a race.”

“I know, but—”

“Britt, your dad didn’t ask me to captain for you today,” he said. “I told him I wanted to, like, a week ago.”

I stared blankly at him. “Why would you do that?”

His hand dropped from my shoulder, and he turned to look straight ahead. “A few reasons.”

“Like what? Last time was a disaster. I … heard you talking to Sid after. You said it was the worst you’d ever ridden.”

“Oh, man. I didn’t know you’d heard that. Britt, I didn’t mean that the way you think.” He sighed. “One reason I asked to ride with you is that I wanted to make up for last time. You’re right—I was frustrated, but not with you. I was frustrated with myself. There’s a lot of pressure in being your captain, you know? If I screw up or have an off day, it ruins the ride for you. I wanted everything to be perfect. I wanted today to be perfect, too, but…” He groaned. “If anything, I’m the burden.”

This revelation baffled me. I was the inconvenience, the blind girl who couldn’t ride her own bike so she had to slow down someone else. At least, that’s what I’d thought. But here Andre was, convinced it was the other way around somehow. I should’ve been relieved, but honestly I was just confused.

“Andre, I don’t expect my captains to be perfect,” I said. “I’m just glad to be riding most of the time. A few hiccups along the way aren’t a big deal. You’re my partner, not a burden.”

He turned back to me. “Same to you,” he said. “Britt, you’re awesome. And funny. And really cute. And just as dorky about bikes as I am. I don’t mind riding a little slower if it means riding with you. And anyone who treats you like a burden is an asshole. I’m sorry that’s what you thought I was doing.”

“We’re going to come back to that ‘really cute’ part in just a sec,” I said as my heart did celebratory cartwheels in my chest. “But thank you. And on the flip side, you don’t have to try extra hard to make things special for me. It’s cool if things get rough sometimes. I don’t want to be your charity case. I want to be your teammate. Okay?”

“Okay,” he agreed.

I let out a breath as an invisible weight lifted from my shoulders. I knew I’d likely still worry about inconveniencing people. I’d spent too much time internalizing the comments of others, the messages I’d picked up from movies and TV, maybe even my own perceptions of disability from before I lost my sight. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever truly untangle it all, but it felt good to know that, maybe, there was at least one person I didn’t have to worry about that

with.

"And now," I said, "let's get back to the other thing."

That goofy smile spread across his face again. "Which other thing?"

"Don't be a tease," I said, shoving his arm playfully. "You said I'm really cute. I'd love for you to elaborate."

"Oh, come on. You know you're cute."

"But I had no idea you thought I was."

"Well, I do."

I felt like my grin might split my face. "You know, the feeling's mutual."

"So you also think you're cute?"

"I meant you, and you know it."

God I loved that goofy grin of his. And loved it more when it was directed at me like it was now.

"You said there were a few reasons you asked to ride with me today. As in more than one. So…"

"So," he said. "I *might* have been hoping I'd get a chance to do this."

He leaned in slowly enough that I could have stopped him if I'd wanted. But instead, I leaned in also. Perhaps a little too enthusiastically. We collided a bit sloppily at first, but Andre raised his hand to cup my cheek and righted us easily.

It wasn't a long kiss. Just a brief press of his lips on mine. But damn if it wasn't perfect.

When he pulled back, Andre said, "Please don't tell your dad I did that. He'll never let me captain for you again."

I laughed, then reached forward and grabbed him by the neck of his jersey and pulled him to me for another kiss. This one was longer. Our mouths weren't enough. Our hands were everywhere. His were on my legs, fingertips running along the edge of my bike shorts. Then they were up my arms, along my back, twisting in my short hair.

And then I was sliding down the zipper at the front of his jersey. Just a little bit. So I could touch my palm against his bare chest. His heart was beating fast, like he'd just pedaled up a long hill. Mine was pounding, too, but the climb was over, and now was the good part. Now we were flying.

He bit my bottom lip, and I giggled before shoving him playfully in revenge. He pulled me down with him, our mouths never separating. And that's how I came to find myself rolling around in the grass with the Bike God.

Luckily, we had our wits together enough to pull apart and straighten

ourselves up a bit before Dad arrived in the van.

“You two okay?” he asked while Andre patched the tire. “You seem a little off.”

“Fine,” I said, praying that my face wasn’t red.

“Mm-hmm,” Andre mumbled.

Now that Dad had dropped off the tire pump, I wished he’d leave. I’d forgiven him for having me ride with Andre now that I knew it was Andre’s choice. But I still didn’t want to hang out with him five minutes after I’d been rolling around in the grass with the Bike God.

Dad, however, completely misread the awkward tension.

“I know it’s stressful when you have to stop like this,” Dad said. “But this kind of thing happens. You’ll be back on the road in no time. And remember, it’s not a race. It doesn’t matter when you finish.”

“Thanks, Dad,” I said.

When Tandy’s back tire was all patched and Dad was *finally* gone, Andre and I put our helmets back on and climbed onto our seats.

“You know,” I said as I spun my feet backward to get our pedals in the right position for kickoff. “It’s not a race, but I bet there are still quite a few people who haven’t caught up to us yet. Let’s at least kick their asses.”

Andre laughed. “Deal. Okay, taking off in three … two … one.”

The Leap and the Fall

KAYLA WHALEY

IT WAS COLD, and the cold made us reckless. They say summer's when you have to watch out, all that sunlight heating the blood, turning us to fools drunk on youthful possibility. But drunk's better than chilled and numb and desperate to feel anything at all.

Gemma kicked the ground, coating the toe of her boot with wintry slush. "Can't even snow properly in this fucking town." She'd been doing that a lot more since she turned sixteen last month—cussing. And not just *damn* or *hell* anymore, but *fuck* and *shit* and *fucking goddamn shit*. Suddenly, for Gemma, cussing was like biting into a ripe peach: the messy violence of flesh, teeth, and juice.

"It's almost snow," I said, reaching up to scrape some off the fence she was leaning against. With my arm lifted as far as I could manage, my fingertips barely edged over the top, but I palmed a small amount into an almost snowball. I didn't throw it, just held it out to her and wiped my grimy hands on my jeans.

We were on my property today, like usual, the house a ways behind us. Now that Gemma had her license it was easier for her to come here than for me to ask Mama to drive me to her place. Gemma used to ride over on one of their horses, sometimes even walk over despite the ten-mile trek if the day merited. The last time I saw her go anywhere without her car was on her birthday. She'd been here that evening, forgoing the party her dad wanted to throw her. The two of us had pizza in my room, with the frozen-aisle cream puffs she loved so much for dessert instead of cake. As the fields outside burned copper, Gemma left for her usual walk through the dusk. Her head always got loud at night, needed starshine to soothe her toward sleep. I watched her through my window, cutting across the yard, heading for the tree line out by the barn. She wrapped her arms around herself as she walked. I wished I could do something to keep her warm.

She hadn’t gone on a walk once since then. Not here, anyway. So I was part-surprised and part-relieved when she said, “Let’s do something.”

“Like what?”

She scraped her boot back and forth. Her rustling clothes sounded like hay under restless hooves. “Let’s go somewhere,” she said. “I’m bored. I’m so fucking bored, Eloise. Aren’t you sick to death of this place?”

She turned before I could answer, and I followed her. Of course I did. I followed her when she headed past the house, past the barn, and down the road. I hesitated only when she turned into the woods.

“Gem, you know I can’t go in there.” I gestured to my wheelchair with the hand that wasn’t on the joystick.

She smiled, like she was about to share a secret. “I found a path. Come on.”

Wary but hopeful, I crossed from paved road to forest floor. These were her woods, where she went on her walks or when she wanted to be alone. I’d never been able to follow before, not with my tires made for the level reliability of man-made floors. They’d sink sure as shit in anything looser than gravel and catch on any exposed roots. But just as Gem said, a clear strip of packed earth wound through trees that were half barren branches and half evergreen needles, all giants. Gemma took my hand once we were fully consumed by the dull green and gray-brown of Georgia winter. She led me, her arm twisting back to reach, her fingers resting on my wrist. My pulse fluttered the whole time. It’s not that we never touched. We’d grown up playing Miss Mary Mack and braiding each other’s hair like everyone else. But somewhere between middle and high school, we stopped holding hands in the halls, and suddenly those moments when our arms would brush in class or when she’d tug my sleeve felt strange. Creeping through the woods, connected like this, also felt strange.

Too soon, the trees fell away, and Gemma’s touch followed them.

“Oh,” I breathed, a slight sound, inadequate. This was a moment for gasping.

She’d led us to a carnival. An abandoned carnival I never even knew was here, not two miles from my house. Grass with long blades covered the field in patches. We snaked around them, crossing from one bald spot to the next, Gemma in front to warn me of sudden holes or uneven ground. She’d taught me years ago to watch for darker shades of green in the grass, like she does on horseback, but that trick wouldn’t have helped here. Finally, we came to the entrance, one so old and disused that even the graffiti had faded to cotton-

candy pastels. We had left the farm in the early afternoon, but the Ferris wheel, half-claimed by kudzu, threw its shadow nearly to the tree line. Maybe we had gone more than two miles after all.

Once we got close, I could make out a name above the ticket window: STARLIGHT CARNIVAL. The name bothered me. It reminded me of whenever Mama read a cloudless sky and said, "We better get the horses ready. Storm's coming." I'd stare at the horizon, the earth, even into the sun itself, trying to see what she saw. I stared at that sign now, reading the words over, mouthing them, feeling foggy, like I was missing something. Maybe I *had* heard of this place before? Or read about it somewhere? Or maybe feeling unnerved at the sight of a strange, broken-down carnival was a perfectly normal reaction.

"It's amazing, isn't it?" Gemma said. No *fucking*. I didn't know if that meant more or less enthusiasm these days.

She stepped toward the entrance. Her hair, normally ruby bright, looked coppery in the weak sunlight. Her neck must have been cold for her to leave her hair hanging loose on her shoulder blades like that. She hated the tickle of strands slithering down her shirt; she'd usually tighten her bun ten times every day to avoid it. I imagined that my fingers, still warm from her hand, could heat the skin below her hairline if only I reached out, if only I were able to reach up.

I clasped my hands in my lap. "How'd you find this place?"

She shrugged and sighed, maybe contentedly. It was hard to tell. Besides that small interruption, all was silent. No birds chirping, or rats rustling, or cicadas humming in the tall, sticky grass. *Nothing to hear*, I thought, and half expected the ticket seller to pop up and finish, *Nothing to see*.

"Come on," Gemma said. "We didn't come here to look. We came for a fucking adventure."

I ran my free hand along the main gate, which had been left open. My fingers tripped along the bars like plucking the strings of a harp. A sliver of rusted metal sliced my index finger. I stopped suddenly, using my driving hand to help raise the other to my mouth. When I sucked the shallow cut and the taste of iron coated my tongue, I almost said I wanted to go home. We were trespassing, right? If someone found us … but that wasn't really the issue. No one would find us. Gemma turned and raised a questioning brow: *What do you want, Eloise?* So I swallowed my blood and my better judgment, and followed her into the carnival.

The area immediately beyond the entrance was open air, a scattering of booths and picnic tables. We wandered under a latticework of broken glass

bulbs strung from wooden poles, past the ring toss and shooting-duck gallery and a funnel-cake stand. Mildew laced the air, but I imagined I could smell greasy dough and stubborn fried sugar underneath. My nerves morphed from a vague anxiety to the more familiar fizzy nervousness of being with Gemma—of being alone with her, where anything might happen if only she wanted it to.

Gemma laughed when she spotted the merry-go-round and ran toward it like a child, footsteps hasty and thunderclap loud. She stopped beside a cockeyed horse, its paint chipped away in large patches like mange. I expected her to leap onto its back, one arm helicoptering like the bronco riders she screamed for at the rodeo. But she didn't. She kicked it once, twice, three times, her body shuddering from the effort, before the horse toppled and thunked against the floor. My stomach dropped along with it, a combination of shock and sick thrill. She seemed overly bright, standing there above her kill. Beaming, without ever breaking a smile.

We left the plastic horse—Gemma running and me trailing her at full speed—but the sound of its fall chased me. We sent hollow laughter back over our shoulders, as if we were brave to laugh at echoes.

* * *

Twilight had drained any remaining color from the carnival by the time we made it past the rides and games to the real attractions—the ones not meant for children with greedy, sticky fingers, but for everyone old enough to have greedy, sticky souls.

"There'll be ghosts," Gemma said, standing in a patch of grass surrounded by a circle of large tents meant for freaks and frights. The tents were unmarked, whether because that's how they'd always been or because the signs had been lost to time I couldn't tell. I was glad not to have to see the crude drawings or ads naming the "attractions" I imagined. Gemma stood in there, one small girl in an open space, but she filled it; she belonged. After a moment she said, "Aren't you afraid of the ghosts?"

When I shook my head, something like fingers tickled the back of my neck. I shivered and smacked the spot, but it was only a piece of hair that had fallen out of my ponytail. "No such thing."

And there wasn't. No such thing as ghosts or spirits or even the Holy Spirit, though I sang my toneless praises every Sunday just the same. I didn't mind pretending, but I wouldn't be afraid, not even if Gemma for some reason wanted me to be. Not even when she scoffed and entered the closest

flap and didn’t hold it open for me. She had chosen the smallest tent, seemingly at random, with frayed fabric black as a starless night. The name on the sign out front flickered back to me: Starlight Carnival. And suddenly I realized what had seemed so off. Carnivals travel. They’re easy to pack up and ship along to the next way station, but this place was rooted into the earth like those pines we’d come through to get here. The surrounding gate was steel and posted deep into the earth. The booths, though largely wooden, were bolted down and chained. Even these tents, flimsy though they looked, must have been built strong to still be standing after so long. One springtime squall should have toppled most of these. Yet here they stood. I waited for Gemma to come back out so I could tell her something was wrong here. But the longer I waited, the harder it was to breathe.

Sometimes when I couldn’t sleep, I’d pull my blanket above my head, the air getting warmer and heavier until my lungs burned with recycled breath. It was a pleasant pain, precisely because of the relief I felt after: ripping the blanket down, gasping, gasping again, mercifully cool air pouring down my throat. My lungs burned now. My face burned. My chest, my hands, my scalp. I did what I had to—I ripped the blanket away. I went into the tent.

Candlelight greeted me. Gemma always carried matches she’d stolen. From diners and gas stations and kids at school. She never lit them; she said she liked their potential. She felt stronger knowing they were there, waiting for her to need them. She used them now, though, to light a fleet of gnarled little candle stumps. The scent of lavender, smoke, and old melting wax rose above crates, a dirt floor, and legless chairs. I’d had this fantasy before: the two of us completely alone in a room full of candles. But the soft light didn’t quite reach Gemma’s face, and the small tent felt more claustrophobic than intimate.

“Gemma, let’s just—”

“Have a seat, Eloise.” Her voice was so familiar, so comfortable. She turned her back to me and continued lighting the almost candles. Almost candles like almost snow. That had been this morning—just this morning? But there was no white dusting anywhere in this carnival. I hadn’t noticed before, but once we left the woods, the world turned dirt and dry again, like we were in a reverse snow globe.

I pulled up to the table, planning to blow out the small flames Gemma had left there so that we could leave. The wood was oak with a grain that had been beautiful once, but rot pocked its edges. It must have been here for years, decades maybe. I traced the still-intact whorls, distracted. I couldn’t seem to

keep hold of my thoughts. Something about candles. Something about snow. Placed perfectly in the center of the table was a small white box no bigger than a pack of cigarettes. I almost picked it up. Its strangeness stopped me. No dust. Everything else here showed age and abandonment. Even the parts that felt wrong (what had felt wrong?) looked empty of life somehow. This box was clean. Used recently? Or maybe Gemma had already wiped it off.

Mama says a storm's coming.

Before I could speak (what had I been going to say?), Gemma opened the lid. Inside: a simple deck of cards.

"Let's play a game, Eloise."

"There's too many of them to be playing cards." My voice sounded strange. Muffled. I shook my head to clear my throat. No. To clear my head. My thoughts were muffled—no, *muddled*.

She laughed. "That's because they aren't playing cards. They're fucking tarot cards." Her smile stretched wider than when she had burst into the clearing, than when we'd passed through the gate, than when she'd stomped that carousel horse. She was bright as the sun that had surely left us by now. I leaned toward her, fire and all.

She tipped the cards into her palm, where they nestled against her calluses. The backs of the cards were plainest gray. They looked old, faded and yellowed at the edges. From nicotine, maybe. Gemma set them on the table and spread them across its surface, as if she'd done so a hundred times. Where had she found them?

"Can't be too careful," she said, nodding at the cards. "Shuffling any other way can damage them. Tear the corners. Bend them." She massaged them into disarray, then slowly built them back into a deck.

I watched her hands. They seemed smoother in the candlelight than they had under the winter sun. I almost reached out and skimmed my fingers over them, but I didn't want to interrupt.

"What's happening?" I asked. Seemed like I meant to say something else, but I couldn't … "Since when do you know anything about tarot cards?"

She placed the deck between us, waiting. I cut out of habit. They felt like normal cards, worn like the ones at home, though these hadn't been used for all-night poker sessions betting gummy bears and crusty pennies.

Gemma's lips spread slowly. I'd seen a similar smile before, but only in the quiet dark of my room, alone. In my fantasies, her shoulders were always bare, and she teased her fingertips over her exposed collarbones, but I stayed focused on her mouth. In my fantasies, her smile was a promise—of teeth and

tongue and taste. This other smile, the one she wore now and that curved like a scythe, was a promise, too; it was a warning I couldn't understand.

She drew three cards and placed them facedown. "This card represents the past," she said, pointing to the one on my left. Then, moving to the center: "This the present. And this your future." She lingered over the right one—the future—almost dipping to touch it.

"Are you scared?" She asked it the way a child might ask, *Has Santa come?*

I shook my head hard.

"Your hands are trembling. It's okay if you are. You can tell me."

I shook my head again, harder, and clasped my hands tight together, as if Jesus himself was watching me pray. "I'm not afraid of some old cards. Or my future." *Or you*, I almost said, but the lie was honey clinging to the sides of my throat mid-swallow. I'd been afraid of her, of how she could break me, since the first time I caught myself wanting to kiss her. But this wasn't that. Something about snow. Something about ghosts.

"Silly girl," she said, and flipped the first card.

The top of the card read *The Fool*. An image of a woman balanced on a pedestal like a ballerina en pointe, arms spread wide, ready to fall into the darkness below. Ribbons red as bloody gashes wrapped her torso. She smiled, leaned forward.

"Blue skies," I whispered. Not a cloud above her.

Gemma didn't hear. She sighed, wistful. "Girls. So fucking eager to fling themselves into oblivion. All of you. What could be so *fucking shitty* about your life that you'd welcome it?"

Something was wrong. Gemma was wrong. Maybe it was this tent, the haze from these candles, that was making her angles, her laugh, her eyes all needle sharp. I lightly touched my chair's joystick and kept my voice from shaking, if not my hands, when I said, "It's late, Gemma. Let's go. We can always come back tomorrow."

"You don't know that. We haven't gotten to your future yet."

She flipped the second card. I would have backed away to the exit, meant to even, but she reached across the table and grabbed my driving wrist. She twisted—hard. I sucked all my shock and pain through my teeth and held it there, afraid to let go.

"Eight of Swords," she said as she flung my arm away from her.

I stared down, cradling my left wrist in my right hand, throat tight with choked tears.

She yanked my chin up. “Look at the fucking card, Eloise.”

“Why are you doing this?” I didn’t care that my voice shook now, that even I could hear the pleading.

A few years before, I’d watched as Gemma’s seventeen-hand gelding had bucked her mid-gallop. She shouldn’t have been running him in the first place. She flew, first across the open field on his back and then through the air. I raced toward her, begging my chair to move faster even though it was impossible. With her flat on her back and me still in my chair, I towered over her for once, unable to get closer without flinging myself onto the ground, where we’d both be trapped. But even from that too-great distance, I could see her eyes were glossy with fear. That look scared me more than the blood-matted hair at her temple, more than the raspy breath, more than the odd slant of her ribs. I wanted to comfort her, touch her, reassure her. But I was afraid and useless, and I ran for help instead.

For a moment in the tent, with *why* settling around us thicker than the candle smoke, she reminded me of that terrified, broken girl. I reached for her cheek.

“I don’t have a choice,” she whispered as my fingers grazed her skin. Then she lurched away and shouted, “Look at the *fucking* card, Eloise!”

I flinched. I did as I was told. The Eight of Swords. Thorny vines encircled and strangled a swan. She strained against her bonds, wings and long neck reaching for the open air above the briars. Eight swords stabbed the ground around her, too close. I imagined the tang of steel threaded through feathers. Would it tickle and sting like shaving? Would I strain harder, push the thorns deeper in my haste to get away?

Was this the fool’s reward?

“It was easier than I thought it’d be to get you here,” Gemma said. “So willing to follow her with no hint of where she led.”

I stilled. “What?”

“She knew, though. Told me you wouldn’t resist. Did you know you were that easy to manipulate?”

My breath wisped away, eager and more able than me to flee. “Quit it, Gemma. That’s not funny.”

She sighed, disappointed. “You know, for being so utterly infatuated with this girl, it’s a bit embarrassing you didn’t notice when *she* left one day and *I* came back.”

The logic wasn’t what convinced me—the small changes and odd acts I’d noticed but ignored. It was the panic, the rush of blood, the buzz wasping

through my limbs. It was my body begging: *Run*.

"Who are you? Where's Gemma?"

Her (its?) laugh filled the space. The sound tasted cruel. "She's here. We're sharing. Isn't that what you children are taught? To share? Share your toys, and your friendship, and the secret places you stumble upon in the woods."

Her birthday. That last walk she took without me. She must have come here, found this thing. *There'll be ghosts*, she—it had said. Telling on itself. Toying with me by laying the truth out like a bear trap. The room had grown smoky with all the candles, but it smelled dense and sweet, like rotting fruit. My stomach turned, and my head swam. What about ghosts?

Gemma. Something about Gemma.

Across from me, her face looked beautiful as ever. I reached for her, and my wrist throbbed, yanking me back to reality. Not Gemma. *The smoke.* I yanked my shirt up over my mouth and nose and took shallow, slow breaths.

"What do you want with us?" I asked.

Gemma's hand shot forward and grabbed my bad wrist. I felt Gemma's finger bones grind as it curled them ever tighter. I nearly lost my balance but managed to stay upright and keep my face covered.

"The answer to that," the thing said, "lies in the final card."

It yanked my arm toward the card. I tried to pull away, but it barely had to squeeze to keep control. I'd never thought of myself as weak, despite the objective truth of my weakness. But now I finally felt the absence of strength. I threw every ounce of will and hope and atrophied muscle into getting away. Useless.

With my free hand, I clawed at the thing holding me, used the sharp edges of long nails filed down to blades. I didn't need strength to slice through fragile skin. I didn't know how much awareness Gemma had, if any. I just hoped she couldn't feel her skin shredding layer by layer, or her own nails used against her will to cut crescent moons into my wrist. I screamed, loud. Louder even than the time Mom accidentally dropped the branding iron on my thigh when I was little. *Oh.* The branding iron. *The smoke is wrong.* I let go, snatched the nearest candle, and welded the flame to the back of Gemma's hand. A desperate move. The flame should've died immediately, small as it was, but Gemma's skin blistered and white wax dripped down her hand like pus, and the thing finally let go, jerking back.

It writhed in pain. Whimpered. It pulled the burned arm to its chest, and I couldn't help smiling at my small victory. This ghost could be hurt—and by

its own poison.

It screamed again. “Flip the card, you fucking little bitch!”

“Why?” I shot back. “I’m sure you stacked the deck. You know what it is.”

The sound it made was almost a laugh before dissolving into a hiss-yowl like a pissed-off cat in heat. I didn’t know the human voice could make that noise. “Don’t presume, Eloise. Thinking for yourself isn’t your strong suit.”

“You knew the first two cards.”

“Yes, because everyone takes the same path to reach me. It’s always the leap and the fall. The future is the only unpredictable element. And, frankly, the only one I care about.”

“Why do you care about my future? What do you *want from me*?” I screamed. Spit filled my mouth, acidic. Swallowing burned. I needed to focus. I stared at Gemma’s arm. Candle wax had hardened in drips down the forearm like icicles. I imagined peeling it slowly from the freshly burned skin.

“Oh, Eloise. I want what all lonely ghosts want: to consume you. But it’s not your body I desire. It’s your *fucking future*. The destiny you would have had if you’d managed to avoid this moment, had you ignored that foolish urge to jump.”

It leaned across the table and, truly injured, hissed at the effort. Its face—Gemma’s face, but vacant of any trace of her—an inch from mine. “I did everything right. Followed every fucking rule. Ignored every goddamn out-of-line impulse. I wasn’t a fucking fool like the other girls, and they killed me anyway.”

Every atom in me craved flight. My skin tingled with longing for the bite of cold air that would mean freedom, but I was trapped. Worse, so was Gemma, and not just trapped but possessed. This monster with the sob story. Nothing could justify what it—she, I knew now—was doing.

“Who killed you?” I asked, voice soft. Hopefully reassuring. If I could get her to trust me …

For a moment the ghost’s stolen face crumpled. The sight would have been moving if that face wasn’t my Gemma’s. But then it sneered, smile tinged spiteful and gaze cruel. Expressions Gemma had never worn, would never have worn. I hated knowing her face was capable of such. Hated more not knowing if I’d ever see *her* in that face again.

“Flip the *fucking card*, Eloise!”

“What was Gemma’s card? What’s her future?”

“The Lovers.” It smiled again, happy to be back on subject. “I told her to point me toward the second half of the pair. It’s a rare treat to have the

complete set. Now flip the fucking card so we can find out if she listened."

This close, I could see the curl of Gemma's short eyelashes, the flecks of dandruff in her brows, the cracks in her chapped lips. *Her* face, not this monster's. And she was still in there somewhere. I'd seen it when she'd said she didn't have a choice. I moved only my eyes to the card. Gemma had pointed to me, had thought I would complete the set. Complete her future. This I longed to believe; that when told love was ahead of her, she thought of me. She'd never said anything, but then, neither had I.

If she was still in there, maybe she *did* know what was happening. Maybe I could at least say good-bye. I grabbed the back of her neck, got a fistful of hair to anchor myself as well as I could. I didn't have long. My grip was as weak as the rest of my body. I leaned closer.

"Thank you, Gemma," I said.

Her lips were rough against mine. The ghost was startled, which granted me a few more precious moments. Her teeth scraped mine, and a chill raced along my spine.

I thought of the nights we'd spent stargazing with the horses. Of how she'd pull her sleeves over her hands, even in May, to warm her freezing fingers. I thought of her slowly sipping warm, fresh milk because it grossed me out, and because she liked to tease.

The thing sighed against my mouth. No, *she* did. *Gemma* did. I pulled away, but she reached up and placed her good hand against my cheek. "Don't. I can't…"

"What?"

"I can't fight it without you. I can barely fight it with you." She leaned forward and gasped. "It … My arm hurts more now that I'm fully here again."

I rested my forehead against hers, stroked my fingers over her collarbone. "I'm sorry, Gemma. I'm so sorry."

"You had to."

"Not the arm, just … just everything. I'm sorry this is happening." My voice broke, rasped into nothing, an apology as substantial as fog.

She touched her lips to mine, soft as falling dogwood petals. "I'm sorry I never kissed you before now," she said. "Don't turn over the card. You can still get away as long as you don't touch it."

A spasm shot through her and she screamed. Fought. I held her face and swiped at the tears streaming down, but they didn't stop. "Eloise, go. You have to go now. I can't—"

"We have to go. Can you walk with your arm the way it is? Is that a silly

question? I don’t know how walking works.”

She shook her head and huffed out a pained laugh at the familiar joke. “I’m not going. It’s got me. I turned my card. You haven’t. Go.”

I couldn’t speak. I couldn’t obey.

“Eloise,” she said. “You can’t save me. Please. I’m selfish. I can’t die knowing I’m responsible for killing you, too. Please. Kiss me again, then go.”

I hovered close enough for our lips to brush with each breath. If I could wait—keep our mouths apart for a few more heartbeats—maybe I could fix this. Maybe I’d find a way.

But then she whispered, “Kiss me, Eloise,” and how could I not?

This time, our kiss was aching. We both tasted of salt and blood. Of missed opportunities and wasted desire. I wanted more. I wanted to trace her collarbone, her shoulders, trail my hands down her chest, her stomach, lower. I wanted time. Because even if I never flipped the damn card, even if I crawled through this candy-colored graveyard and made it home, this thing still would have stolen my future. It would have stolen Gemma.

“I won’t leave you,” I whispered against her lips, dropping one hand and snatching the last burning candle from the table. I held it above the deck of cards. If this was going to work, I had to be prepared. And very, very lucky.

Before she could protest, I let go of her.

She screamed as soon as I broke contact, a banshee and a scared girl at once. Two scared girls, maybe; one of whose fear had curdled into hate. Gemma couldn’t fight it much longer without me. I waited. I listened to the girl I loved wailing, fighting for her own mind, and I waited. I didn’t close my eyes or tune out the waves of agony cresting and crashing around the tent. I bore witness.

Her body finally collapsed, and when her face lifted toward me, Gemma was gone again. Something inside me recognized that I should be afraid. But I wasn’t. I was ready.

“Flip the fucking card, Eloise.” Its voice was raw, maybe from the screaming or maybe because it didn’t feel the need to pretend anymore.

“I will. You’ve won. She can’t fight you, and I won’t leave her.”

It smiled, and my stomach churned with too much acid. My body telling me again, *Run, Eloise. Run!*

I swallowed, tightened my grip on the warm candle. “But you need to take me first.”

Its eyes narrowed, suspicious of this last request. “Why?”

“Because I’m selfish. I can’t watch you … take her.” I steadied my

breathing but let the tears I'd trapped until now finally fall. "I can't. But you don't care about what I want, so maybe the better reason is because paper—even thick paper—is fragile. Flammable."

I tilted the candle, let the wax run over my fingers and onto the third card, still facedown, but not for much longer. The monster gasped and whined, quieter than I would have liked, but this was only the appetizer.

"Stop. Stop, you little bitch."

"Gemma was right," I said, straightening the candle. "Your power's tied to the cards somehow. You possessed them like you possessed her, is that it? You can lead me here, taunt me, belittle me, threaten me, but until I touch that card, that's all you can do." Candle still in one hand, I lowered the other to the future—Gemma's and mine. The wax was smooth and soft. One thin layer separating my skin from the card's surface.

"Come and get me," I said, "or we'll find out how quickly ghosts can burn."

I flipped it. The Lovers, smiling and content, stared up at me.

The monster left her slower than I expected. I waited for Gemma to scream again. I needed her to scream, to let me know it was out. And then, all at once, she did. She screamed. She was her, and I was me, and you can't see ghosts after all.

Before it could make the leap into me, I dropped the candle, and then the card was on fire, and then the table and all the other cards, too. The fire spread fast, so fast. It couldn't be only wood and paper burning. Beneath Gemma's frightened, pained shouts was something else. It was the shatter of wind against a cliff and the howl of trapped dogs. It was a sharp ringing and the slice of a million shallow cuts. It was exactly what I'd hoped to hear.

Gemma was already trying to crawl from the flames, but she wouldn't make it far with her arm. My driving arm still killed, but my fingers gripped my joystick, and I drove around the table so Gemma could use my chair to stand.

The empty carnival waited for us outside. Something crashed behind me as we bolted. I turned my head as far as I could without turning my chair, too. That would slow us down. The tent was in flames. The fire jumped to the twine lacing the air above. From the twine to the wood poles, to the other tents, and soon the carnival would be ash. Once again, I begged my chair to move faster, to somehow break the barrier of human engineering and *drive faster*. Gemma ran beside me, gasped each breath. Smoke filled my consciousness. It was headed toward the entrance, too, and the wind carrying

it was swift. The smoke would get us before the fire, at least.

We wouldn't burn.

I didn't know my way back through the woods. I couldn't see the path in the dark, and I hadn't paid attention to anything but Gemma's fingers on my wrist earlier. My other wrist was a mess now, but I couldn't think about that. Gemma was behind me, hands grasped onto my handles, letting me lead her —trusting me to lead her. I moved by instinct. Focused all my awareness on my tires. Let every too-hard jolt to my shocks guide me back to smoother ground.

As suddenly as before, the trees fell away and we crossed onto the road. The transition from dirt to pavement was instant and obvious and the most welcome sensation I could have imagined. I should have kept moving, but I collapsed back in my chair, my hand slipping from the joystick with a piercing ache. Gemma stumbled beside me and fell to her knees. She leaned forward, her forehead against my armrest. I rested my hand on the back of her head. It was quiet here, but not silent. Leaves whistled; critters rustled in bushes; owls and coyotes called to their kin. Way off in the distance, a car on I-75. Normal nighttime sounds. And it had snowed since we left. Actual snow, not almost snow. Powder fresh.

"Eloise." Her voice wasn't even as loud as a whisper, only a breath in the shape of sound, but it was everything I needed to hear and everything I was no longer afraid to say.

"I love you too, Gemma."

I sat forward, then gently raised Gemma's chin. She leaned against me. Her face, wet with snow and tears, pressed against my neck. I felt her mouth curve into a smile. Not a kiss, but almost.

As we moved farther from the woods, I focused on the shuffling of her feet in the snow, my motor's steady hum, the scent of pine, the clouds of our breaths, our bodies side by side, this exact moment.

And we went home.

Per Aspera Ad Astra

KATHERINE LOCKE

IN THE DARK of the bedroom, the computer screen hummed at a slightly different wavelength than the tablet Lizzie held beneath her bedcovers. She swore she could feel the difference between the two wavelengths plucking some cord beside her heart, making it beat erratically. But when she paused her game to check her vitals on the tablet again, her heart was elevated, yet still rhythmic. As it always was.

She hoped they wrote that on her metallic coffin. *Elizabeth Abernathy. Elevated, but rhythmic.* If that didn't describe her life, she didn't know what would. When she died, they would jettison her body from Amula, a planet with very little usable land for burials. Space provided an infinite expanse to fill with bodies, dead satellites, and waste.

Lizzie drew her finger from three dots at the top of her screen through a maze to the three dots at the bottom of her screen. It was the first game she'd coded, and it felt comfortable, like coming home. She'd played it enough that it always had the same results. She'd found every variable, every possibility. It was, admittedly, simplistic, but she wanted simplicity right then. Something mindless and safe.

Just before she released her finger, completing that level and moving on to the next, an alert popped up on her screen. Her score dropped to zero, and she groaned. She'd spent most of the morning since her first alarm went off playing the game, and she'd been so close to the next prime number, 101, which was also a mirror to itself, making it a particularly superior prime number.

School: 15 minutes.

She dismissed the alert. Fifteen minutes. That meant she had two more alerts before she actually had to get out of bed. The thought pressed down on her chest, and her tablet blinked another alert.

Heart rate increase.

Duh. That alert was supposed to help her ward off panic attacks.

Footsteps pounded in the hallway outside her bedroom. Then the sound of feet screeching on the smooth tile—and the thunk of a person, dark and amorphous, against the textured glass that made up her bedroom wall. Her six-year-old brother, Bennett.

"SEVEN FEET!" he crowed. He'd been trying to slide farther and farther every day. His shoes left scuff marks down the hallway that would drive their mother into space. But she hadn't been home in days, so Mer, the family's cook, maid, and part-time nanny, kept cleaning them. She could hear him take another flying leap, complete with sound effects like the blasters on the old shuttles in movies. Despite her pounding heart, Lizzie smiled.

She listened, waiting, letting her heart come back down to a reasonable rate, and, like clockwork, her sister stopped at her door. She knocked twice and called out when Lizzie did not respond. "Liz? Are you coming with us to school today?"

She'd asked that every morning for the last four months. And Lizzie loved her for it, for believing that on any day, Lizzie might be able to attend school in person instead of through a screen again. As if Lizzie had a cold and tomorrow, maybe, she'd be better. But the question turned a dark knife inside Lizzie's chest. She'd let her family down in so many ways, and every day the question reminded her that she was a failure. That she couldn't conquer the wires and electrodes and signals flaring through her own brain, her own body, her own networking. And so her siblings went to school alone. And her father had to spend time away from his duties to take them to school for her. And their mother wasn't here because Lizzie was …

"Not today," she made herself say. "I'm sorry, Darcy."

"Maybe tomorrow," Darcy said.

This was their routine. Lizzie wished it was as comforting as most routines were.

"Come on!" called their father from somewhere down the hallway. "Darcy, Bennett, into the shuttle."

Ten minutes.

She inhaled and slid from beneath the covers, her bare feet hitting the cool tiled floor. It hummed, bursting to life and warming at the first sign of movement. The color shifted from pale crystalline blue to a soft red, the sunset she'd seen in pictures of other planets. Some mornings, she curled up in the pink glow on the floor, letting the warmth radiate through her.

But if she lay down now, she wouldn't get back up again. She'd stay there

until the next five-minute increment on the clock, and then she'd run out of time to do what she needed to do before school started. And if she didn't make school, then everything would spiral. The crush of the anxiety she always felt had nothing on the crush of anxiety of actually failing to live up to expectations.

She pulled the sweater of her school uniform over her head, tugged her long dark hair out of the collar. She slid into the seat at her desk and swallowed hard. *Take a deep breath,* her therapist always said. *You can't fight anxiety without oxygen.*

Lizzie took one, then another. It helped enough to see her school's screen pop up after she pressed her palm against the log-in pad.

Seven minutes.

She could still turn in her homework before class started. She closed her eyes, and the shape of the bright screen burned beneath her eyelids. She just needed to hit send. That was all. It was such a basic set of assignments. *Explain the historical precedent set by Amula's independence from the Central Alliance after the Midas Belt War; defend or argue against (choose one) Amula's position of neutrality for ongoing wars between Inner Loop planets.*

They hadn't been difficult essays to write. After all, she'd grown up hearing the story of Amula's independence, from her parents at the dinner table, told in bits and pieces but chronologically, every night, until they'd start again, the way some people read religious texts over and over.

Hit send, she thought. But her stomach twisted into a knot like her fingers used to twine together behind her back at social events, and her heart swelled. Maybe it'd burst, and then she wouldn't have to deal with any of this. Maybe it'd just stop, and that would be much easier. She wouldn't have to spend the next ten days waiting for the essays to come back, sleepless and anxious over them while her therapist said *let it go, let it go, it's out of your control, let go of the things you can't control,* but wasn't it within her control? Wasn't this *all* within her control?

The fifteen minutes of light that would start at the top of the hour came through her blinds, cutting a harsh white line across her bookcase.

Five minutes.

She did not hit send.

She spun in her chair to face the window and scooted until she could reach the windowsill and the button that turned the window from opaque to translucent. She watched the family shuttle pull out of their dock and fly

toward the tower in the middle of Lo, the capital city of Amula. Above Lo pulsed the green-blue sheen of the shield that protected the city and surrounding areas from extraplanetary attacks. Incoming ships passed through a series of gates at the inbound and outbound ports on the outskirts of the city. Lizzie ran her eyes over the shield, instinctively looking for places where the code had allowed for a gap in the magnetic waves. But there were none, like usual.

The shield was her finest piece of work.

And the last thing she ever worked on.

The shield before this one had collapsed multiple times, chronically failing. And as the Midas Belt War spread and the six most powerful planets formed the violent Central Alliance, the pressure had been on the government, the consul and the vice consul—her father—to find a solution.

Simultaneously, Lizzie had begun an internship with Dr. Sha, the electromagnetic physicist in charge of the new shield project. They'd met at one of her father's parties, and the grumpy old scientist had been one of the first people who put Lizzie at ease outside the confines of her home. They'd talked science until they were the last people there, Lizzie in her fancy dress on the stairs, a glass of fruit juice dangling between her fingers while Dr. Sha sat cross-legged on a chair, hands flying through the air as they talked, the wine in the glass they held sloshing all over them, but they hadn't noticed.

"You and I," they said. "We're the next Babbage and Lovelace."

She laughed. "I'm no Lovelace."

Sha had looked pleased she knew of Ada Lovelace. But they shouldn't have been surprised. Lizzie's parents were fans of the Terran classics. She and her siblings, after all, were named after their favorite Terran book. She'd left the party with an internship, a mentor, and a friend.

Sometimes Lizzie could sense Sha's frustration that she wasn't the Lovelace they thought she should be. Lizzie knew of Lovelace, and she knew that Ada's world wasn't her world, and Ada's struggles weren't her struggles. She wasn't confined by society or her mother's expectations. She wasn't a prisoner of society's constraints on her gender, or that society simply didn't have the technology she dreamed of. Instead, she was a prisoner of her own mind.

Her entire body ached with the fatigue of carrying around her anxiety, this twisting, mutating monster inside her. It was barely manageable inside her bedroom. Outside was too much. The monster inside her had grown too large, too heavy, too much.

Sha had sent her a few emails, then a few messages, then they'd shown up at the house. Lizzie hadn't spoken to them. Sha had never ended her internship, but it'd been months since the shield went up, and thus months since she had gone to work. She didn't do anything these days. Her mind no longer itched for coding. Instead, she sat near her window, admired the shield, and knew that she'd never accomplish anything like it again, nor did she want to.

Behind her, the desk screen beeped twice, softly.

School. Zero minutes.

It was too late to hit send on those papers. She gripped the edges of her shirtsleeves in her hands, the sweat gathering in the creases of her palms. She needed to roll the chair back in front of the screen. She needed to get a grip. She needed to breathe. She needed to get away. She needed to hide. She needed—

"Welcome, class!" said Mr. Daniels, in a classroom across the city Lizzie hadn't seen in months.

"Good morning," replied her classmates.

Go back to your screen, she told herself. Tears pricked her eyes. This was so simple. So easy, and yet, she hadn't moved.

"May you have as many opportunities as there are stars in the sky," Daniels said.

"May you have as many blessings as there are asteroids in the belt," the class said back.

Before he could start taking attendance, Lizzie heard a loud crack, like the noise Darcy's arm had made when she'd broken it skateboarding in their hallway two years ago. Then a boom, like thunder but a thousand times closer. It reverberated inside Lizzie's chest, and her first thought was a solar storm. But at the second boom, the house shook. She'd never felt the house shake before.

She ducked instinctively and grabbed the windowsill with both of her hands. The blinds closed at her touch and then opened again, just in time for a lightning strike of bright purple to collide with the shield. The shield shuddered, and behind her, on the screen, students screamed. Lizzie's mind roared with panic, but her eyes stayed wide and trained on the shield.

* * *

"It'll hold," Sha said proudly, demonstrating their model for her father. They gestured to Lizzie. "She did most of the coding. I just told her what it needed

to do."

"That was the hard part," Lizzie protested. "The angles, velocity, strength, current, charge … I didn't do that. I just helped connect the dots."

"Don't downplay your strengths, Lizzie Lovelace," Sha said sternly. "You built a shield, and it'll keep this city safe. And if Lo and the power grid stay safe, then Amula will be safe. We'll stay out of this war through self-sufficiency."

"And luck," said her father, studying the small model. He looked up in the silence that followed. His eyes moved from Sha to Lizzie as he said, "You may not be able to quantify or study luck, but it exists. We rely too much upon it, in my opinion."

Lizzie didn't often hear her father's opinions. She heard the opinions of the government and long-held historical beliefs, but not of her father. Just a man, facing the inevitability of a war. And though Sha told him that he wouldn't need to rely on luck any longer, Lizzie wanted to tell him she believed in luck, too. It'd brought her to Sha, and Sha to the person who could help them build the shield.

* * *

Another crack of purple lightning. The shield vibrated and then burst where the second bolt had struck. Somewhere in the city, Lizzie knew Sha was swearing up a solar storm in a multitude of languages. But there in her room, for a moment, everything seemed quiet and slow. The green-blue sheen over the city rippled and fell like a wave to the ground.

Then everything went dark. For a brief moment, Lizzie thought she was panicking, that she just hadn't registered any other part of the panic attack. Then she took a deep breath and exhaled, and the world remained dark. Another boom, and another spike of purple lashed through the sky, striking the Mergstar, home of the parliament and consul's offices. The vice consul's office. Her father. And all the top scientific labs. Her mother.

The explosion's light blinded her.

Lizzie screamed, shoving herself beneath the bed.

The shield was gone. And a strike on the Mergstar. This was no accident.

Her mind began to reach out for the code, to problem solve and push against the question, to demand answers. But another part of her, a part she couldn't control, held back her mind. She pressed her forehead into her knees, gritting her teeth. The shield was gone. She didn't know what happened next. Which of the Inner Loop planets was attacking them? Why breach the

neutrality? Why not try to reach out to the consul and vice consul?

Unless Lo had tried to prevent an attack. She wasn't, after all, privy to her father's communications. She'd helped to build the shield, but that didn't make her an adviser.

She did not know what came next.

The emergency lights around the baseboards of her room sparked and then hummed to life, a distant glow peeking through her windows. The desk screen said, "This is a message from the emergency beacon system. Emergency personnel, please proceed to Polestar and Mergstar. This is a message from the emergency beacon system…"

It'd repeat until it, too, failed, or until full power was restored.

Lizzie inhaled and exhaled faster than her heart pounded. They'd lost power. The planet with only fifteen minutes of light once an hour was cloaked in darkness again. The generators were down. Deliberate or a side effect of the shield's collapse, it didn't matter. Without power and without the shield, Lo was vulnerable.

She swallowed. She was trapped. The world was terrifying, but staying inside had been safe because it had been her *choice*. Now she wasn't sure if that was still true. If she was still safe.

She reached up from beneath the bed to the small drawer on her bedside stand. She pulled it open and fumbled around inside until her fingers collided with a cool metallic container. She gripped it and slipped back under the bed, pressing herself against the wall for something stable and reassuring. She opened the flat metal box. Inside were her *just in case of emergency* pills. Her *don't use these unless you have no other choice* pills—like she was making it up, like she was trying to let it get this bad so she could take pills that made her feel slow and off-kilter. She didn't care how she'd feel in three minutes, she wanted to feel better now. Slow and off-kilter was always better than a mind spinning so fast that inertia kept the panic going. She pressed a pill beneath her tongue and felt it dissolve there. She closed her eyes against the onslaught of her heart.

Breathe, she told herself. But she couldn't make herself take the deep five-second breaths.

Tell yourself a story, she heard her doctor say in some distant memory of a therapy session. Lizzie began, *Once upon a time.* But then her mind tripped and fell to its knees. *A planet lost its power and its shield and found itself at the mercy of luck in a galaxy that had used up all its luck a generation ago.* She almost laughed at her own ridiculousness.

“Code, don’t write,” she told herself.

But she wasn’t even coding. She was on the floor while her city was in crisis. She was on the floor after the building where both of her parents worked had been struck by a bolt of energy from an unknown source. She was on the floor. *Worthless*, her mind whispered. *Knew it*, hissed her bones. *Waste of space*, murmured the blood in her veins. She shuddered.

“Lizzie?” a voice called hesitantly. “Lizzie, we must go downstairs.”

Mer. She scooted out from beneath her bed, hands clammy and ears ringing. Whether that was from the explosion or her own thoughts, it was hard to tell.

“Lizzie!” Mer exclaimed, stepping into her room with a flashlight in hand. It bobbed across the ceiling wildly as Mer dropped it onto Lizzie’s bed, and Lizzie wanted to tell her to turn it off, to preserve the batteries, but her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth.

“Liz,” said Mer, pressing her palms to Lizzie’s cheeks. “We need to go to the shelter.”

Ah yes, her father had told her about this. Drilled this, even. It wasn’t that they were more or less important than anyone else on the planet. It was simply that he didn’t trust his own children *not* to get in the way of rescue and response efforts if the war came to Lo.

Lizzie blinked.

The war had come to Lo. Maybe to all of Amula. That’s what an attack like this began. It was not a singular event. It would keep going.

She inhaled. Exhaled. Her mind vibrated, but at a low hum. No screech of panic. No alarm bells. No room spinning, no nausea.

The medicine was kicking in.

Mer took her hand. “Come.”

Lizzie balked. “No. I’m not leaving the room.”

Mer turned, face ashen. “Elizabeth Abernathy. We do not have time for your games.”

Games washed over her like a bucket of cold water, rinsing the effects of the medicine from her system. This was how everyone saw her all the time. A faker. A drama queen. Someone who could turn off her anxiety and her panic but chose not to. Lazy. Ineffectual. Cowardly.

Mer tugged her hand, and Lizzie’s mind switched back in the other direction dizzyingly fast. How could she be worrying about that when her planet was under attack? What kind of terrible person was she?

Her knees buckled.

“Not today, Lizzie,” said Mer firmly. “Get downstairs and you can cry all you want.”

Guilt swarmed her like bees. “I’m trying.”

Mer’s glare softened a bit. “I know. But we don’t have time for you to try. Move.”

Lizzie followed her down the stairs and through the house to the basement. She gathered details as she went and left them like bread crumbs behind her. The art in the hall had changed. When had it changed? Darcy’s bedroom door was open. Clothes everywhere. There were still dirty dishes in the sink. The chaos of her surroundings slid its fingers around Lizzie’s throat. *Everything’s falling apart*, it murmured. *You did this.*

“No,” she muttered aloud.

“Faster,” Mer begged.

The city’s loudspeakers crackled. *“This is the emergency beacon system. All citizens are commanded to shelter in place. The following locations are off-limits to civilians until further notice: Mergstar, Polestar.”*

Mer pulled the kitchen door shut behind them, shaking a pile of keys from her pocket. Lizzie blinked at them, then remembered. They used keys for the safe room because keys could not be hacked. No wave, no signal. She wavered where she stood. This was real, wasn’t it? It wasn’t something that happened to someone else. This wasn’t something her mind invented in a dream. This was real.

Her whole life she’d fought a war on the inside. And now a war was coming to her from the outside.

BOOM BOOM BOOM. A hard series of knocks echoed in the kitchen, startling Lizzie. She doubled over, her vision spotting. They were here already. She didn’t know who *they* were, but they were here all the same. The Central Alliance. Raiders. Anyone. Anything.

Mer yanked open the door. “A delivery? Now? Are you mad?”

A boy stepped through the doorway, holding out a package. He was tall, almost but not quite as tall as Lizzie, with blond hair that kinked at the ends and the same Amulan light brown skin as she had. The dim glow of the emergency lights washed their faces out, casting an eerie orange sheen over their trio. He wiped at his face with the back of his hand like he’d driven through a rainstorm. Sweat, Lizzie realized. He’d been afraid.

“I don’t get to choose when I make deliveries, ma’am,” he said to Mer, who took the package from his hands. Cheese. Like they had any use for cheese right now. “I didn’t plan on being on the streets when they came.”

“Who?” demanded Mer.

The boy glanced at Lizzie, casually, then his eyes snapped back to her before they could keep traveling. “I know you.”

She blinked. “I don’t know you.”

“Ros,” he said. “Ros Dennard. I graduated the Academy last year. Few years ahead of you, I guess.”

“And now you’re delivering groceries,” she snapped. Someone who’d gone to Lo’s top technology-focused secondary school shouldn’t have been delivering packages. He should have had an internship. He should have been fixing the shield. Or going to the city’s defense.

He didn’t miss a beat. “And you don’t leave your house, I hear. Been a year for both of us.”

Lizzie turned away, heat rising on her cheeks.

Mer growled a little bit. “I asked you a question.”

Ros wiped at his face again. “It’s the Central Alliance. There’s no power out there, just the emergency lights, and the emergency power station’s taking a strong beating right now. LOFOR is everywhere.”

Lo Forces. The city’s defense. In Lizzie’s entire life, LOFOR had never been called to the streets of Lo. The Amulan army would come, too, wouldn’t they? She couldn’t even recall the closest base. It was thought LOFOR would suffice in most crises. Was this expected? Where was her father? He’d surely send a message, even if he was busy helping at Mergstar.

“They don’t stand a chance, I figure,” Ros said quietly. “The shield’s down. A surprise attack without our strongest defense … the city will fall.” He gestured to the package. “At least you’ll have cheese.”

Mer had turned toward Lizzie, her eyes wide and meaningful. Lizzie read the look on her face. *You can fix this.* She shook her head and backed away, slamming into the door of the blast chamber. “I can’t.”

“Lactose intolerant?” Ros asked knowingly. “My little sister is. It’s the worst. To be fair, though, if we’re all going to die, does it really matter if the cheese will bother your stomach? I’m not sure I can think of a better way to go.”

Lizzie’s mind splintered, distracted and snagging on his words. “Lactose intolerance wouldn’t cause death. It’s an intolerance, not an allergy. But that’s not what I meant. Mer, I can’t. I *can’t.* There’s probably nothing left to fix. They hit the power grid. Nothing I can do will help that.”

“Intolerance might not cause death, but the Central Alliance sure will,” said Ros. “Six Inner Loop planets against us? We don’t stand a chance. Not

sure why the power's out, though. I passed six of the eight power towers on my way here, and all of them seemed fine. Just quiet. Usually there's that hum."

"Yes," Lizzie said faintly. "Electromagnetism interferes with human hearing and neural functioning. We mitigated that."

"How?" asked Ros, the humor fading from his voice, replaced by a keen curiosity. "I've always wanted to know how you built that thing. Just you and Dr. Sha."

Lizzie closed her eyes. "I didn't build it. I wrote the code."

"That's building," Ros said.

"Code *is* engineering," Mer said offhandedly, her tone more fierce than she likely intended it to be when quoting Lizzie's own words from a year ago back to her.

"I don't know where anything is," Lizzie protested. "And Sha, Dr. Sha, they'd be in Mergstar, and if Mergstar was hit…"

"Wait," said Ros. "Can you … can you fix the shield? By yourself?"

"No," said Lizzie at the same time that Mer said, "Yes."

The woman and the girl glared at each other. Mer said, "You don't know if you haven't tried."

"I *have*," Lizzie cried. "I know you think it isn't real. I know you don't know what this is like. But it *is* real, and I can't."

Above her, the city's loudspeakers crackled. Galistar. The tower with the elementary schools.

Lizzie's veins were ice and fire. She spun toward the nearest wall, desperate to feel anything other than the sheer panic and wildness screaming in her head, in her bones, in her muscles, in her veins, in the spaces between her lungs and her heart, in—

"Bennett," she whispered. "Darcy."

"You know someone at Galistar?" Ros said, paling.

"Yes," Lizzie whispered. "My siblings."

She closed her eyes, knuckles pressed against her forehead until the bone against bone brought some clarity to her mind. She could not help anyone at Galistar. She couldn't think straight in a crowd. And chaos would only send her over the edge. She wasn't useful. She couldn't help her siblings. She couldn't help her father. She couldn't help her mother. She was so useless.

But if the power grid wasn't down. If they'd shut off the main power for some other reason. To protect Lo in the attack. Then the shield could be restored. She didn't know why it'd gone down, not yet, but maybe she could

fix that. And if the shield went back up, she could buy Lo some time. It wasn't much, but it wasn't nothing.

She spun toward Ros. "I need a ride."

Ros straightened. "To Galistar?"

"No," Lizzie said, swallowing hard. "I'm no help there if there's fighting. But I can help LOFOR. If you can get me to Polestar."

"You're going to try," breathed Mer.

Everything in Lizzie fought against the feeling. She shoved the fear for her brother's and sister's safety at her anxiety, holding it like a wall inside her. She found a little space to breathe and seized it, drawing in a deep breath. "Yes."

Ros nodded. "Let's go. If they've held the line that I saw coming in, we can get in around the back. I have a friend by those gates. He'll let us through."

Lizzie nodded, dazed, stepping toward him. He caught her by an elbow. "You going to be okay?"

"Yes," she said. "Just … promise me something."

"Sure," he said, like they'd always been friends. Perhaps that was how Ros made friends. By trusting them immediately and offering his trustworthiness in return.

"Don't laugh at me, and don't let me run away," she said.

His dark eyes were serious, but his mouth tilted up, amused. "Those are not encouraging last words. Try to think of better ones on our ride."

"You're already laughing at me," Lizzie said sharply, feeling heat rising to her cheeks.

He pointed at her, his eyebrows shooting up, his grin growing. "I didn't hear laughter, and I don't like being accused of such heinous crimes. Come on."

How he could joke at a time like this, she didn't know. But Lizzie didn't have much of a choice other than to follow him.

Outside, she could see the edge of their sun on the horizon, splitting beams of white light through the streets. Five minutes until the top of the hour. An entire hour had passed since the shield fell. Everything was moving so fast, too fast. It was too much all at once. They were under attack, and the shield was down, and Polestar, which housed the power-grid computers and the shield computers, was damaged, and Mergstar, which housed the government and the university, was damaged, and Galistar, which housed the public primary school, was damaged, and everything—

Ros touched her elbow. “Ever ridden a hoverbike before?”

She shook her head, and he handed her a helmet. He settled on the black motorbike, and she carefully swung a leg over, sliding in behind him. He turned his face toward hers just enough so she could hear him over the sound of guns and pod-cannons firing in the distance. “Hold on. It’s kind of a piece of junk. I was going to fix the stabilizer tomorrow. That’ll teach me to procrastinate.”

She wrapped her arms around him tightly, and he kicked the bike to life. It lurched into the air, tilting wildly as Ros grunted, his arms tightening as he tried to straighten it. It wobbled and he leaned, pulling Lizzie with him. They shot out of the back alley that led to the kitchen of Lizzie’s house and swerved onto the main street, the spinning tires slamming into the side of a house. Ros shoved off the wall with a foot, and they arced to the other side of the street.

“Do you know what you’re doing?” Lizzie shouted at him.

“Probably should have asked that question before you got on!” he shouted back.

“That’s not funny!” she yelled, clinging to him.

“Are you sure?” he said, and pressed the bike forward. They spun and wobbled and careened around the city, ducking between LOFOR forces and the platinum ships of the Central Alliance. LOFOR pods and ships were black, with no visible lights on their exterior shells, deliberately making them nearly impossible to see in the forty-five minutes of darkness every hour. But the sun was rising now, so their advantage would be lost for the next fifteen minutes. The sleek ships of the CA, built with slave labor, broke through the darkness with infrared lights lining the hulls. They didn’t seem to need spotlights, or sunlight, to maneuver easily through Lo’s towers, despite their size.

Ros sat up, slowing the bike, and then coming to a stop. He put his foot down to catch the bike before it landed and turned his head to stare down a street. Lizzie followed his line of sight. CA forces. On the other side, LOFOR.

“After we’re done here,” he said, “I want to eat some of that Swiss cheese back in your kitchen. I don’t want to *look* like Swiss cheese.”

“Then you should probably go,” she said shakily.

He kicked the bike into gear just as shots started to fire up and down the street. He swerved down an alley, ducking through the underbelly of Amula, a part of it Lizzie had never seen or really known about. They passed homes with thin walls and without windows, homes that wouldn’t stand up to a war like the one raging on the streets above. They whizzed by people sitting in

their doorways despite the warning, and then Ros drove up stairs on the other side, back onto a main street, behind the LOFOR lines and with a clear view of Polestar.

“How’d you know that shortcut?” Lizzie gasped.

“I grew up down there,” Ros said.

How’d you get into the Academy? she wanted to ask. *Why did you come back?* But he didn’t elaborate, and she couldn’t make the words of her questions come to her tongue.

They parked the hoverbike by the side gate, and Lizzie slid off it onto shaking legs. She took a deep breath, and then the enormity of everything began to press down on her. She tried to take another deep breath while she watched Ros reach for the gate. *No, wait*, she nearly said, but it came too late. He shook the gate, and the alarm at the top went off, loud and clear.

No time for this, she told herself. She shoved away her feelings, fears, memories, everything, put it in a tiny box in her head and sat down on the lid. She didn’t have a lock, but that’d hold for now. She ran to the gate controls. Feeling around at the base of the control panel, she yanked it free and bent, examining the wires. The alarm screamed incessantly above them.

“Goddamn space trash,” swore Ros, covering his ears and wincing. “Where’s the guard?”

“Dead,” she said. “Or inside. I don’t know. Do you have a pocketknife?”

He brandished it. “Don’t cut yourself on it.”

She snorted and snapped the blade free. She cut through the blue wire with a single motion. The alarm stopped. She cut the green one, then the yellow one, and then crossed them, stripping the rubber from around the wires. She twisted the bare copper ends together tightly and then hit the green button. The gate alarm sounded, but only once, shortly, before the gate swung open.

Lizzie took a deep breath and looked at Ros. “Let’s go. I don’t have time to shut the gate from the inside, so we’ll have visitors eventually. I don’t want to find out who they are.”

“Agreed,” Ros said. “Lead on. Do you know the way?”

She did. And she wished she didn’t. At least her nightmares that replayed arriving to her internship and finding “someone better able to handle the pressure” standing at her desk would serve her well. They ran through the empty hallways, abandoned by those assisting LOFOR or going higher in the tower for more sensitive assets. They didn’t know what was down here. Ros and Lizzie took only one or two wrong turns, then retraced their steps to find the correct path to the central command station.

“Central command,” said Ros, stopping, breathless, in the hall. “We did it.”

Lizzie kept walking. “It’s back here.”

Ros coughed. “Uh, you’ve walked past all the control rooms. They’re this way.”

“I didn’t forget, if that’s what you’re thinking. We didn’t put the computer that hosts the shield up there, or any of its servers. That’s too obvious a target.” She pressed her hand against the door pad of the supply closet, hoping, praying that Sha hadn’t removed her from the security system.

“Welcome, Miss Abernathy,” said the computer. “It has been one hundred thirty-seven days since your last entrance. Should I inform Dr. Sha that you have arrived?”

Lizzie opened her mouth to say no, and then a thought occurred to her. “Yes. Please.”

If they were alive, wherever they were—they alternated between Mergstar and Polestar—then they’d come help her. They wouldn’t let Lo, and thus Amula, fall without a fight.

The door swung open, and Lizzie stepped through. The emergency lights were on in here, too, casting low eerie shadows of their legs and feet. But the computer for the shield was hooked up to the emergency generators, too, for all the obvious reasons, and so the screen glowed bright blue in the middle of the room.

ERROR: 202-PT ERROR FOUND

“That looks bad,” Ros whispered, coming up behind Lizzie.

“It is,” Lizzie said. She shook her head. “I can’t do this. I can’t do this.”

“You can. You did it before,” Ros pointed out.

Lizzie closed her eyes, because if she kept looking at the screen, she was going to cry. “I know, I know, but that was probably just luck before. There’s just no way I’m going to be able to find the problem in time.”

“In time for what? They’ve already attacked.”

Lizzie opened her eyes and cried out, “I don’t know, Ros! Before they kill the emergency generators or blow up Galistar! This could take ten minutes or ten days or a year—I don’t know! How am I even supposed to search that fast? I’m just one person. I only have two hands.”

“I’m here,” he said, meeting her gaze. “What do you need me to do?”

“Nothing. You can’t do anything. You don’t know how to do any of this,” Lizzie snapped.

Ros's hand closed around her elbow. She swayed and leaned against his shoulder. The room spun, she was sure of it, even though she had no horizon for it and couldn't see anything but the blue error message in front of her. His voice was quiet and steady. "Take a deep breath."

She took a deep breath. She exhaled it slowly. "I know it sounds ridiculous."

"It doesn't," he said, and even if he was lying, Lizzie was grateful for the small kindness. He added, "You're one person. But I'll stay here the whole time, and it's better than not trying at all. I promise you."

"What'd you study at the Academy?" she asked him, because she needed to buy herself some time to get a grip on her mind again.

"Architecture," he said. "Lo's growing."

"Oh," she said softly, taking another deep breath. "That's smart."

"I know," he said simply. She couldn't think of anything else to say for a long moment, but Ros didn't seem to mind. Then he said gently, "No one's asking you to fight the whole war, Lizzie Abernathy. Just do this one thing because it is something you *can* do."

She closed her eyes, swallowing back the tears, and when she opened them, the error message crystallized in her vision. "Okay. The system's detecting a virus. Whatever that purple light was, it must have been carrying a virus that they injected straight into the electromagnetic waves that would have carried it back into their drivers hosted on each of the towers. If I debug it here and then push the updated code to the towers, that should prompt the shield to upload again."

"I understood all of those words as separate words but not in that particular order," said Ros. "I trust you. Get to work, Abernathy."

Lizzie slid into her old chair in front of the blue screen and put her fingers on the keys. She took a deep breath and thought about Darcy and Bennett in Galistar, about her father and mother in Mergstar, about Mer back at the house, about Ros, who didn't need to help her, but was. She hit enter and brought up the code. Her vision swam, and Ros touched her shoulder again. She blinked, and the screen sharpened back into focus. She could do this. She couldn't do everything, but this was one thing, and she could do this one thing right then. It was all she needed to worry about until it was done.

So she got to work.

Ros talked to her as she typed, deleted, corrected, and chased a virus through 480,000 lines of code. She cracked her neck, barely listening to him, but finding his voice soothing as he told her about how he grew up poor, went

to the Academy, and graduated by the skin of his teeth. He'd never liked school. He didn't learn from books, but rather from putting his hands on things directly and figuring out how they worked.

Lizzie deleted a line, rewrote it, letting her fingers guide her, listening.

He'd fought tooth and nail not to fail out, and it was only because of his recommendation letters that he got into university. Then he dropped out of university to take care of his mother. He told her about making deliveries all over the city, about the people he got to meet, about everyone who told him that now that his mom was better, he should go back to university.

"Why?" she heard herself ask in a daze. She stretched her hands and looked up at him.

"Why go back?" he asked. When she nodded, he shrugged. "I want to build new towers and think about Lo's future. Cities are like organisms. We're growing rapidly. We'll need better mines and bridges, get food and energy out to neighborhoods farther from Lo's center. They only let you do that if you go to university."

"Talk to my father," Lizzie said, drawing her shoulders up and rolling them to get the knots of tension out of them. "When this is over, talk to my father."

"I like how you said that."

"How I said what?"

"Talk to my father. You're basically a princess of Amula. Or at least of Lo."

"We don't have a monarchy," she replied automatically.

"Okay, princess," Ros agreed cheerfully. "How's it going?"

"Almost done," she murmured. Her mind and fingers slowed as she found code she knew she hadn't written, a digital signature she didn't recognize. *Ha*, she thought, fighting the urge to smile.

"Is that it?" Ros asked.

She could feel the panic creeping in, dark and shadowy, on the edges of her mind when she slowed down, when her fingers stopped moving. So she didn't answer him. She couldn't. This was only the first piece of the puzzle.

She moved the corrected file to the central hard drive and dropped it there. It uploaded quickly, and then she opened the software they'd built for the towers. She pushed the update to them. The progress bar inched across her screen. She sat back, letting her hands fall into her lap. Ros didn't move from her shoulder, and she knew she was crushing his fingers between her back and the chair. But he didn't flinch, and neither did she.

Lizzie didn’t know she had burst into tears until Ros was kneeling next to her, gripping her hands hard in his. “Hey. Hey. Focus. I know. You’ve been working really hard. Look at me, Lizzie.”

She lifted her head, meeting his gaze. He wobbled in her vision; then the tears spilled and he steadied. He raised an eyebrow. “We did not come all the way across this city, and I did not tell you my life story, for some faulty interweb connection to fail us. Let’s figure it out.”

Pressing her palm against her chest, Lizzie whispered, “I’m just so tired of trying so hard all the time and failing every time, even at things I know I can do.”

“I know,” he said quietly, taking her hands and holding them tightly. “But this isn’t one of those times.”

“It feels like it,” she said. This felt like the culmination of the last four months, like maybe this had happened because she couldn’t leave her home, but now that she had, nothing was going right. Like this was every moment she’d ever failed everyone she loved, but bigger, and more important, and more real. She shivered. “What if I can’t?”

“Try again. Try another way.”

She looked back at the screen. “Okay.”

He gripped her fingers tighter. “Good. Get going.”

“I need my hands, Ros.”

He dropped them, a faint flush crawling up his cheeks. “Yeah. I guess that would help.”

She almost smiled and turned back to her computer. She opened up the interweb connection, thinking about what Ros had said. There were a ton of packets of information being sent by the interwebs. She didn’t want to shut down military communications, but she could stop resident-to-resident interwebs and reduce the strain on the system. She took a deep breath and cut those lines. They turned red on her screen, one by one, and then the capacity of the system moved from yellow to green again.

She pushed the upload back out to the towers. This time, the progress bar ticked steadily. Five percent. Ten percent. Fifteen. Twenty.

“What if—” she began to say.

Ros wrapped his hand over her mouth. “Shhh. Don’t you dare jinx this.”

They watched together as it crept to thirty-five percent, and then paused. Lizzie held her breath. Then it jumped to fifty. Fifty-five, then seventy-five. Eighty. Ninety-five.

“One hundred,” she whispered into Ros’s palm as he said it aloud.

He dropped his hand from her mouth just as she heard a loud hum outside and then a series of cheers. She spun her chair slowly, looking up at Ros. “We did it.”

He grinned. “*You* did it. Look at you.”

“I couldn’t have gotten here without you,” she pointed out. “That was your one thing. And it was no less significant than mine.”

His eyes lit up, pleased. “Good. What’s next?”

The pressure swelled in her chest like a balloon filled with water. She gripped the arms of her chair and then took a deep breath. She was sitting in the control room in front of the computer where she had just restored the protective shield to her city, to the capital of her beloved planet. She’d met a stranger, and she’d left her home, and she’d solved a problem. She didn’t need to fight the war. She just needed to solve the next problem in front of her.

“I need to find my siblings,” she said slowly.

Ros offered her his hand, and she accepted it, letting him pull her to her feet. He settled the helmet over her head and met her eyes with a steady gaze and a firm set to his mouth. Determination, she realized, and she suspected she looked the same way. “Ready?”

“Yes,” she said. “Let’s go.”

Found Objects

WILLIAM ALEXANDER

I'M HOME, STRETCHED out on the sofa and savoring post-show melancholy. My phone makes a happy noise. I know that the text is yours before I look at the screen. My phone only ever sings out when it hears from you.

Still here? you ask.

Nope, I type back. *Home. Resting up. Still at strike?*

The rest of the cast and crew is currently wiping the world clean of everything we've built together: dismantling the set, taking down the lights, and coiling endless miles of electrical cables. Everyone is there but me. I need to recharge, though, especially if I'm going to join you all at the cast party later. Everybody knows this. No one complains. But it still seems like a big deal to be the only exception. Even Bobbie is at strike right now, and we know to keep Bobbie at least ten feet away from power tools at all times.

Yes, you send back. *Still at strike. But there's weirdness …*

That gets me up and pacing back and forth across the living room. *What kind?*

You don't answer right away.

My cane makes steady thumps against the carpet. The house is quiet otherwise. It doesn't shift or settle to accommodate anyone else's weight. Both Mom and Dad are at my sister's place right now, enjoying their new status as grandparents and trying to be useful so Louisa can recharge her own batteries. I'm the only one here. I'm waiting for you.

Your kind of weirdness, you finally answer. *Your voice. I can hear your lines from the show. But you're not here.*

I type *FUCK* several times. Then I erase them all. It still feels cathartic to have put down a series of unsent, unspoken fucks. Sharp consonants haunt the screen where those fucks used to be.

Is this one of those things? you ask. *Like the puppets?* Your brother still

talks about the puppet show we staged for his fifth birthday—and how all the puppets kept right on puppeting after the performance.

Maybe, I say. *Probably. Yes. Clear everyone out, ok? Save the rest of strike for tomorrow.*

Ms. Samatar will be irate, you point out.

Blame me. Just get them to the cast party. See you there.

I pace my way through another long pause. You've probably cut the music and shouted out for everyone's attention. You always play awful music at strike. And while driving. I love that you don't ever apologize for loving such awfulness, and I suspect hidden depths in that poppy, bouncy, vacuous noise just by association with you.

You're probably managing an upbeat evacuation right at this moment, making everyone else happy to ditch the work and go celebrate early. I picture this happening. I try to avoid thinking about things that might be happening instead, right now, during this same stretch of silent time.

The pause ends.

Ok, you say. *On our way out. Need help dealing with this thing?*

First I type *NO*. Then I soften it to *Nope. I'll be fine.*

Ok, you say again, and that is the end of the conversation.

My knee-jerk, all-caps, unsent overreaction also haunts my screen, so I turn it off. Then I switch it back on to talk to my grandfather.

The call doesn't go through. The battery lacks the proper kind of juice. So I hold my breath, hold the phone, and squeeze it for a full minute while cane thumps keep time. Then I try again.

He picks up after the third ring.

"Abuelito?"

"What's wrong?" he asks, voice scratched up from several decades of cigarillos. "You only ever call me when something's wrong."

"Untrue."

"Perfectly true. So what is it? Tell me."

I tell him. "We finished up a show tonight. But I might have played my part too well."

"Curb that arrogance," he says. "Not a virtue."

"Clear-eyed honesty is a virtue, though," I insist. "And my character is still there. Seems to be taking shape onstage and running lines without me."

Abuelito sighs his scratchy sigh. "Maybe you really shouldn't be in theater."

"Because I'm kinda good at it?"

“Exactly. You could take up music instead.”

Music had been *his* thing. “How is that safer? You started a student riot with just your voice and a guitar.”

“I did, didn’t I?” He sounds wistfully proud of his riot. “Maybe that needed starting. Maybe it was good trouble to be in. I’m not so sure about the trouble you make, however. Or the trouble you wake. What is it this time? Which part did you play?”

I hesitate. He hears me hesitate. “Richard.”

“The second?” he asks optimistically.

“Nope. The third.”

“Ay.” He sighs, huffs, and puffs. “What an uplifting choice for the high school drama club.”

“Yeah, well, we’ve had a rough year. ‘Woe to that land that’s governed by a child.’”

“And they cast *you* as a crippled villain? Will they make the only Jewish kid in school play Shylock next?”

He’s not wrong, but I don’t want to hear it. “Calling you up for advice, viejo. Not critique.”

“Don’t die. Can’t really recommend the experience.”

“Thanks.”

“De nada. It’s nothing, offered freely from nothingness. Now go deal with that Richard you’ve set loose. Call me afterward to tell me how it went.”

“Sure.”

“And send me another picture of your sister’s new kid.”

“That takes a pretty strong connection, but I’ll try.”

“Do what you can.”

“See you, Abuelito.”

“Not too soon, I hope.”

The screen goes dark. He’s gone.

In the old rites we spilled blood to chat with ancestors. Odysseus killed some sheep on the outskirts of Hades so his mom could drink the life they shed and remember how to talk to him.

Pain works, too.

But I don’t want to tell you that.

I *almost* told you after the musical, when we spent hours uprooting those cardboard trees. I’d poured a little too much of myself into those painted roots, just to keep the trees from falling over, and that worked far too well.

“You. Are so. *Literal*,” you spat at me while we hammered floorboards

back into place.

“Sorry,” I said.

“Stop saying that you’re sorry. You might suddenly transform into the board game. I hate that game.”

“It doesn’t work that way,” I said.

We uprooted two more trees before you asked, “How *does* it work, then?”

I wanted to tell you.

“Just something that runs in my family,” I said instead. “My grandpa could sing and make the solid world listen to him. And I’ve got a cousin who dances. She changes the TV channel just by stamping her foot.” All of that is true, but I only told it to you to deflect attention away from me.

“Neat,” you said. Then you put on awful music while we finished with the cardboard deforestation.

I should have told you then. I almost told you right after your favorite aunt’s funeral, when I offered to mess with your phone. We were standing in the parking lot. You shook your head hard and left little snot trails on my shoulder. I don’t usually get to feel stronger than you, but right at that moment I did.

“No,” you said, several times. “Don’t call her. She’s out of pain. At least now she’s out of pain.”

That’s such a weird phrase. Out of pain. Like pain is a place. One you can visit. And your only consolation, the single glimpse of silver lining you could find, was the fact that your beloved aunt Rebecca wasn’t like me anymore. Better dead than in pain. But I live here, in this place. And I don’t know how to tell you that. I don’t want you to squirm, or take my hand and say that it’s tragic. I don’t want you to roll your eyes as though I’m playing a macho game of one-upmanship: My pain can beat up everyone else’s adolescent pain, so I’ll just be over here in the corner, savoring the depths of my stoic suffering and shedding no more than a single tear while I listen to every single cover of “Hurt” and “Hallelujah” on repeat. No, you can’t help me. Don’t try to help me. Please try to help me.

That is not where I live. That is not what this means. But I still don’t know how to tell you what it does mean.

You’ve probably ushered everyone out of the building by now. I hope so. I don’t want to see them when I get there. I don’t want to see you. Not yet. Because you’ll offer to help. And I won’t know how to handle that.

I lock up the house. It’s cold outside. Puddles and slush piles have refrozen.

The long walk to school takes me through that intersection, the one where the other driver sneezed and the fickle gods of automobiles smote me down. But the other driver also died, so it's hard to stay mad at him. I drop a coin on that spot, just like always. The last couple of coins are still there, frozen underneath a clear sheet of ice.

Thomas Kail High School looks unconscious, blinds drawn and big classroom windows dark. The front doors are locked. I don't have a key. I don't need a key. One squeeze and the latch clicks open.

Fluorescent lights flicker in the hallway with sleepy malevolence. I hear a rasping, ringing sound, like someone is scraping the edge of a bell down the length of an old slate chalkboard. The only other sounds are the steady thumps of my cane and the crunch of sidewalk ice stuck between the treads of my right shoe.

Always strange to see this hallway empty. It isn't haunted. It doesn't seem to remember the crowds of bustling students, even though we filled up the place earlier today.

The Football Triplets accosted me this morning, right on this spot. They came down the center of the hallway in an ambling clump of matching team jackets and equally identical, entitled haircuts. I moved aside. They paused instead of passing me by.

"Pimping cane," James said. He tried and failed to put a little gangster into the word.

Fuck that nonsense, I did not say. *Fuck the machismo you're using to hide the clear discomfort that I cause you by existing. Fuck your need to channel that discomfort back in my direction. I am not here to make you feel better about the fact that I am here.*

Instead, I took a bow. Added a small flourish and gave the floor a punctuating tap with the cane tip. We're theater kids. We know how to spin attention into something useful—even unwelcome and uncomfortable attention. My unsaid fucks still haunted my courtesy.

"Is that thing stylish, or medical?" Josh asked.

"Both," I told him, squeezing the chrome-plated derby handle of my very stylish cane.

They laughed. I laughed. We all laughed together.

"Got a sword hidden in there?" Jeff asked.

Yes, I thought.

"I wish," I said, and shrugged as though I'd just dropped character to share a moment of candor between friendly acquaintances. Then I smiled and made

my way around them. They took up a lot of hallway, and a lot of oxygen. Their attention always made it hard to breathe.

AP Biology happened right after that. You skipped class, so you missed Mr. Fitz's lecture on maladaptive traits.

It was fun.

"Let's talk about chronic pain," he said, first thing. Three drops of coffee got stuck in his mustache after he took a sip.

Oh good, I thought. *Let's.*

"Pain exists because it's useful for bodies to know when something is wrong. That has a clear survival benefit, right? But pain can also overreact. Fingernail injuries aren't life-threatening, but they hurt badly enough. That doesn't seem very adaptive, does it? And what are we to make of chronic pain, *idiopathic* pain? *Idiopathy* is Latin for 'we feel like idiots because we have no idea what's wrong with you.'"

Some laughed. I didn't. I've heard that joke from doctors before.

Mr. Fitz wrote *idiopathic* on the board in bright scarlet marker. "This kind of persistent discomfort has no apparent physiological source. If it began with an injury, it might remain long after the injury has completely healed. What do we make of that? How can permanent suffering be a survival trait?"

Donna squirmed at her desk, right next to mine. "Maybe it *isn't*," she said. "Who can live like that? I wouldn't want to live like that."

I quietly channeled a little idiopathic sensation and shaped it into something small, flat, and sharp between my fingertips. A guitar pick. I've never been able to play more than three chords and half-truths, but the pick made me think of Abuelito and all of the fucks he wouldn't give. Then I used the sharp edge of that pain pick to dig grooves into the edge of my desk.

The rest of the class continued to discuss maladaptive traits while I tuned out, breathed slow, and generated a small pile of sawdust. No one noticed. I felt simultaneously scrutinized and ignored.

That's what you missed in biology today.

That metallic, scraping, ringing sound is getting louder now. I can hear it on the other side of the auditorium doors, which are locked. You must have locked up after ushering cast and crew safely away. Good. This feels like coordinated teamwork between us, even at a distance. It feels like a complex scene change that unfolds exactly as it should.

I pour a little idiopathic sensation directly into the doorknob. Tumblers tumble and I go through.

Just to be clear, chronic pain is not required for doing that sort of thing.

My cousin Dolores could have danced it open. Abuelito would have unlocked this door with a song. I've heard him sing hanging laundry off the line by filling up their empty limbs with his voice and making them dance right along with Dolores.

I do things a little differently, though.

That rasping noise fills up the whole space with its steady rhythm, but I don't see its source yet. The bare bulb of the ghost light burns center stage. I smell friction-scorched sawdust. Half the set has been dismantled and sorted into piles of salvage and scrap. The rest is still un-struck, but it doesn't look so very different from those dismantled piles. Ms. Samatar called all the raw material *found objects*—art made out of repurposed recycling—and said that it symbolized the brief and terrible reign of King Richard III. He broke everything to rule over the pieces.

The whole set still looks like a clubhouse built by the sorts of boys who crave zombified excuses to shoot everyone else in the head. Zombies aren't coming, though. Trust me. I talk to the dead on the regular. Some might drink up blood and pain, if both are freely offered. Others do not wish us well. But none of them hunger for our brains.

I approach the stage by moving slowly down the house-left aisle. Then I see him.

King Richard has used found objects to sculpt himself into something human shaped and approximately eight feet tall. Most of him seems to be made out of costumes wrapped around a wooden frame.

The self-made man stands just offstage. He sharpens one of our dull prop swords against a length of pipe. It makes that rasping, ringing noise, over and over and over again.

I feel instantly territorial, as though the king were trespassing here. This place is *ours*. Yours and mine. This is where we work, and where we play. It is only by our gracious permission that other sorts of events and assemblies are even permitted to happen here, because we keep it running. This stage will yearn for us long after we both graduate. It will remember us. But it doesn't need to remember King Richard. Not this well.

He isn't really trespassing, I guess. He was born here, right here where I made him.

"Your Grace," I say politely.

The cloth wrap of his face turns toward me.

"Thrive I in my dangerous affairs of hostile arms," declaims the king. I wince. He sounds only marginally better than a phone-recorded playback of

the show. “Myself myself confound … It cannot be avoided but by this. It will not be avoided but by this.”

“I know.” And I should have known better. I lost the proper distance, poured too much of myself into the role, and let a vicious, relentless, murderous thing stand up as a part of the solid world.

I shrug off my coat and drop it into a front-row seat before I take the stage. My cane makes a new and louder noise against the hollow wooden stairs and then another sort of noise when it treads the boards.

King Richard crosses the stage in my direction. He uses the length of pipe as his own huge, heavy cane. It marks up the floor with each thunk. The prop sword points directly at me like an accusing index finger.

I take up a fighting stance. My legs protest. I’ve asked too much of them today already. They know it. They want me to know that they know it. I shift a little more weight to my cane, and that feels more stable. Tripods are harder to tip over than bipedal things, don’t you know. It isn’t just about the weight distribution, either. Those three points of contact send up sensory data about the ground, expanding proprioception and kinesthesia—which are two of my favorite tongue-twisting words to over-enunciate backstage as vocal warm-ups. Try them. Works even better than “red leather, yellow leather.”

Canes are also useful for parrying sharpened stage foils.

“Defend thee!” roars the king.

I put several piles of coiled cable between us, hoping he’ll trip over them, but Richard is nimble on his two peg legs.

The king is made out of lumber, cloth, and my own repurposed pain. Now he wants even more raw material. He’ll need an additional dose of pain from me in order to build himself up further. That’s fine. I can share. And I’ve been squeezing idiopathic sensation into my cane with every step. Now I draw that pain back out. The sword is sharp and shaped to inflict itself upon others.

I’d love it if my pain-made blade would cut right through the cheap steel of his stage foil. It’s not *that* sharp. But the two swords do strike off sparks when they meet. This is deeply satisfying.

Richard keeps right on spouting our lines. “I myself find in myself no pity to myself!” The king of shreds and patches has nothing else to say, no other words to use. He also fights in familiar loops. I know what he is going to do before he does it, so my sword arrives in that spot before his does. I cut patches and shreds away from him.

“Spleen of fiery dragons!” I shout at him, just for fun. I love that line.

He swings his pipe at me. I already know that the blow is coming, but it

almost gets me anyway. That pipe is too heavy to parry. Besides, I'm still used to doing *his* side of the fight choreography. Now I have to switch roles and try to play the heroic Richmond instead.

King Richard is also bigger than I am, and stronger. He's theatrically larger than life, just like I made him. And I'm all worn out from making him. I slip up. He gets through my guard. Ow.

"See my shadow in the sun!" he roars, exultant. The king just has to gloat. And when he gloats, he shifts his attention to the wider world that should be paying rapt attention to him. But the seats are all empty. There's no one else watching. And right at this moment he isn't watching me.

I take advantage of this self-congratulatory moment and cut his head off.

Richard collapses. All the found and repurposed pieces of his body scatter across the stage, losing themselves again.

I don't collapse. Not quite. But I'm not very steady at the moment. I let my idiopathic blade dissolve.

The word *pain* does too much work, you know?

It's like *sorry*, which really shouldn't have to carry both "I sympathize" and "this is all my fault." And we keep putting *pain* right next to *suffering*, as though they mean exactly the same thing. But sometimes they don't. Pain can be background noise. Bad music playing in some other room. Rain on the roof. The sound is always there, but I don't always notice it. And there's no other way that I'm somehow supposed to be.

I think that you might understand. But I'm not sure I can drop my guard enough to tell you how my body works. Even though I sometimes get hints that you do want to know. And not out of pity. Or lurid curiosity. I hope not, anyway. But I can't tell for sure. I wish I knew for sure. That would make it so much easier to ask you for help. But I'm bleeding right now, because Richard did manage to stab me that once, so I need to stop thinking about the way you sometimes bite your lower lip when you look at me. I need to stop wondering what that might mean and finally ask.

I need a little help.

I almost call Abuelito first, because I promised him that I would, but I don't want to wake him up. He'll just be frustrated that he can't bandage me over the phone. Maybe I'll give the old man an update from the hospital.

I want you to take me there. I hope I don't bleed all over your car. There is blood seeping between my fingers as I press torn shirt fabric against the stab wound. I drop my cane so I can take out my phone. The stylish chrome handle makes a thump against the stage.

Help.

I haven’t sent that text yet. I haven’t told you anything. But I’m going to. I will.

Plus One

KARUNA RIAZI

“IT’S AN INVITATION from God,” her mother had said.

Or did she mean *a gift*?

There certainly hadn’t been a phone call crackling with distant importance in the middle of the night or a chance encounter in the masjid. But Hafsah could tell her mother was relieved that the invitation had been extended to them at all and wouldn’t be in the mood to deliberate exact semantics—though she wasn’t entirely sure if you could consider it given for free, like gifts were. After decades of prostration, the grooved patterns in the janamaz, their embroidered prayer rugs, gave testimony to the continuous history of worship, supplication, or whispers in the night. No voice ever responded, but there was always a hope that a day would come where an answer might appear like this.

Of course, there was also the fact that Hafsah and her family were the ones to be paying a visit, and not the other way around.

Their living room floor certainly wasn’t fit for the type of company (if you could consider God on the same scale as visiting cousins from overseas or the occasional auntie from the masjid who could remember you from when you were “this high”) that could tug you miles, over the ocean and across expanses of acrid sand, for the sake of worship and piety. Unless, you know, said company didn’t mind wading through piles of unfolded clothes and inching over spare pairs of Crocs (oh, the embarrassment) to nestle in and have a nice meal of half-eaten granola bars and leftover samosas.

“I know,” Hafsah said. “But I’m not sure if that invitation mentioned me, specifically.”

Her mother put aside the pair of pants she was folding and raised an eyebrow. “And now I’m wondering why you don’t think that invitation would mention you. Specifically.”

This was exactly what Hafsah *didn’t* want to think about right now, but at

the very same time, the thing she wanted to discuss most. She didn't mind the invitation. Honestly. Hajj was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

It didn't often feel that way, considering the amount of available brochures, agencies, and groups to entrust with your passports and identities and very life, and how they promised to protect you on a second visit, or even the lesser pilgrimage of Umrah, or the proud and rather tanned pilgrims who returned with plenty of heartwarming testimony and faith-affirming stories to be passed around at the next community iftar, already speaking eagerly of their next trip back eastward.

But it was complicated by multiple fees and inconveniences that arose when you least wanted them to, from her parents having to arrange their wills, to asking for days off from work and school.

In particular, Hafsah wasn't looking forward to explaining to her teachers that a pilgrimage wasn't a pleasant day trip, like being excused to go to Disneyland.

The packing wasn't the hard part, nor mustering up the amount of social tolerance and extroverted spirit required to attend the nightly prep classes at the local masjid along with the rest of their designated group.

She wanted to say that the classes didn't scare her any more than the usual religious admonitions and anecdotes, where death was always a handspan away, and the chance to abide by the rules of earth in order to gain Heaven was fleeting. She wanted to say that, out of everything else going on, they were the least of her worries.

But they didn't scare her when she was already on edge from trying to fumble through what should have been an easy conversation with someone her age while worrying that she had black pepper speckling the gaps between her teeth.

Bad nights were a different story.

What was hard, particularly on bad nights, was what the classes chose to emphasize: mainly, the fact that the rigors of hajj might mean you wouldn't see your family again. Hafsah could see visions—of the horrible stampedes and falling cranes and devastating fires of previous years—flash before fellow pilgrims' eyes as they picked over soggy dumplings doused in spiced yogurt and shyly made friends with the people they would be sharing rooms and buses with for the next few weeks.

And then there was the whole "this is what is meant for you, and you should put your heart and soul into it" prerequisite everyone—parents, Qur'an teachers, even envious friends—seemed to stress. That scared her a lot, just

like it frightened her whenever she stood to pray and her mind drifted away from her body, ignoring her folded hands and furrowed brow in favor of playing a Top 40 pop song on repeat, jumbling the right supplications on her tongue. Or how her brain reminded her just how much she'd left undone on her daily to-do list for the sake of listening to that song until she knew every lyric, every eyebrow-raising moment of innuendo (which her parents never picked up on, thankfully). Her conscience taunted her, prodding her with every bouncy word as she stood, folded her hands, bowed down, raised her head. Prayer should have settled down her nerves and untangled her stomach.

Instead, it became another step in her daily march of shame. The constant *Hafsah Is a Bad Muslim* show.

Hajj felt like the kind of social event for which the invitation was printed on eggshell-colored paper with gold trim and would be kept out of reach—on a shelf, on a mantelpiece, by a parent's bed—until it had to be taken out and presented at the beginning of a receiving line. The kind of event wherein your parents knew how to mingle comfortably, while you reached for the wrong fork.

And, no matter how much her mother reassured Hafsah, it didn't feel like the type of event you brought a plus-one to.

Particularly the plus-one Hafsah always had with her.

"You'll feel better once you get there," her mother said after a moment passed. She gave the pants a confident pat as she settled them in the suitcase.

That's what she always said.

"You'll not regret going."

That's what Hafsah always hoped.

And finally, looking her daughter firmly in the eye: "This isn't the type of thing where you've been invited by mistake. The visa worked out—for you. The money was there—for you. You are wanted there."

You.

Just you.

That was what Hafsah was worried about.

* * *

Hafsah and It had been together for as long as she could remember.

Really. Some days, her father tried to tack down a proper date, tried to convince her that there had been one particular day when It had sidled up, taken a liking to the way her face looked when she was sulking (pursed lips and blotchy cheeks), and had tagged along with her ever since.

Maybe It had latched on that one time Hafsah sat on the overcooked asphalt of the masjid parking lot as she clutched her scraped knee and bawled, insisting to her mother that something, somehow, had forced her tender skin to meet the concrete.

Maybe It had lingered on her lap through her cousin's wedding reception, disrupting the gold, glittering joy of the shaadi by nudging her so that she dragged her sleeves through her plate, or forced her forward with a well-timed shove during family pictures so that her elbow got tangled in the alarmed bride's nath and tugged the poor woman's nose downward with the earring's chain.

Regardless of when It arrived, It was still there. She could point at It, in the midst of scattered dishes and broken promises and the sludgy days when even breathing felt like a prolonged act of energy squandering. And everyone else averted their eyes, moved on and away while It nestled at her feet, smug and unchallenged.

Just a year ago—a terrible year punctuated by prolonged night terrors—Dr. Khalid, the family doctor, had grasped her by the shoulders and told her, very reassuringly and seriously, that it was just a "teenage phase" and if she just appreciated her parents a little more, it would all "blow over." (The air quotes were Hafsah's, supplied to the original discussion in the car on the way back from the office, which no one else seemed to appreciate—though she could never be sure if it was her attempt at humor rather than submitting to tears, or her lack of acceptance in her own guilt, or the fact that It was still curled on her lap and hardly blinked through the whole ordeal.)

Hafsah wished it was just a phase. Really. And no one seemed to understand that—how she really felt, how unenjoyable it truly was—or realize that there were days and nights when Hafsah tried to wrest Its weight from where It was pressing down on her chest and making it hard, so very hard, to breathe.

It wasn't a pastime. It wasn't a pleasure. It was not one of those things you did to aggravate those around you, smugly, like plastering gum to the bottom of a restaurant table or placing a plastic snake on your aunt's shoulder. It weighed on her. No one ever seemed to account for that, though.

As long as It wasn't with them, they didn't seem to care. Her friends gave It wary looks during slumber parties for an hour or so. Just as long as it took Hafsah to reassure them that It wasn't their parasitic problem, their permanently strung albatross about the neck. Then they were giddy again with their popcorn battles and careless sprawling about the pillows and sheets.

Her parents tried. They really did. But theirs was less of a dismissive acceptance and more of a hyperaware “This is happening, but it will be over soon” state. Hafsah could see an edge behind their otherwise bright smiles when It prowled into the dining room at her heels. Like Dr. Khalid, they insisted that it was just a stage, while their anxious gazes belied their confidence.

She wished they were right. It was one of those things you just went through, like that embarrassing Bon Jovi obsession back in fourth grade or having braces at thirteen. So much would be easier that way.

Including getting through a security line.

Which, as it turned out, on the afternoon of their journey, was going to be a problem. After bypassing the hurdles of an unbothered Uber driver, a clog of equally eager bodies, and suitcases and exhaustion in the otherwise streamlined vein of the JFK terminal, It couldn’t allow her to have a good beginning to the journey.

That wasn’t part of Its agenda.

She was sure, horribly sure, in a way that prickled up her spine, that the TSA agent could see It, smug and confident, taking a step for every one of hers. Why else would she be tapped, out of every other hijab-wearing, wary-eyed woman in the line, marched past confident, privileged travelers—the type of people who didn’t have names, identities, or skin tones that would irk security—in order to be roughly patted and asked about her intentions, her vocal inflections, why exactly she was so reluctant to ease the cloth on her head back from her ears?

They could all see It, she was sure. That was why the rest of the waiting passengers murmured. That was why they eyed her as she tugged and tucked herself and the tatters of her dignity back in place, then returned to her family, red cheeked and warm in spite of herself. Her mother briskly patted her on the shoulder and told her that she was fine, it was fine, head up, good girl.

“It happens to all of us,” a young sister remarked to the air, jiggling her son on her hip. “Sometimes it’s, you know, jewelry. The safety pin on your shoulder.”

The thing that has currently draped itself about your neck.

“They shouldn’t do that to her going through the second time,” the leader, Imam Fazli, quietly informed her father. “God willing, that experience was just one of those things that you go through to make you a little apprehensive about the journey. Maybe a belt buckle or a ring she forgot to slide off, you know. Just make a prayer and it’ll be fine.”

Just pray hard and It won't be able to cling on. That was what they always said about Shaitan, the devil. If you make the right invocation to God, the devil has to flee, his wiles and bidding strewn before him. Perhaps he'd even have time to turn around and ball up a tight, trembling fist: "I would've gotten away with it, too, if it wasn't for that girl and the way she was able to pray me away!"

Maybe that was the problem with Hafsah: She took the wrong things too lightly. She could conjure up the Cursed One himself in her mind's eye and dwindle him down to a white-toothed, seedy, and travel-stained door-to-door salesman. She did homework instead of afternoon prayers, then tacked them onto her evening obligations as an afterthought.

At least that was better than the clammy-palmed experience of asking a teacher for a spare classroom, fumbling to prostrate herself onto her scarf rather than the grimy floor for lack of a rug, being all too aware—thanks to her weird-wired brain and its lack of concentration—of the whispers of other students as they passed and saw her movements and deemed them strange.

Glad tidings to the strangers, she had heard repeatedly in masjid gatherings, from the mouths of many imams and khatibs as they finished Friday sermons before prayers. But you couldn't feel glad when you felt that heavy gaze of censure and suspicion against your back—and, for Hafsah in particular, the added sensation of Its tail tapping in time with every soft yet carrying statement.

She didn't pray hard enough, and thus It hung on like the worst sort of bur—invisible and painful, and unable to even elicit enough compassion because of how frustratingly simple it should be to brush it off, shake out the sheets, splash your face, put on a smile and fake it until you make it, fake it until you *want* to make it, fake it until you know how to want to make it.

The fact that they could all see It was, quite often, the worst part. They could see her failures. They could see how little she did, so that this unwanted, unwelcomed guest nestled Its way into her airplane seat, managing to squeeze under the belt and avoid a flight attendant's potentially raised brow of censure, jostling her forward as the plane rolled down the runway.

It pressed Its weight down on her lap, and she kept her head bowed when her father leaned down and asked her if she wanted to stretch her legs in the aisle for a moment. He could see It, as he always did, and in the darkness of the cabin, she was sure she could see the grimace on his lips as he realized his own mistake, how his cumbersome daughter and her constant companion would trip over barely extended feet and into innocent seatmates, and quietly

patted her shoulder before he sat back down.

It was a humiliation.

It was an abomination.

And she couldn't help but feel like she was, too.

* * *

Of course her parents chose the package that involved a trip to Makkah prior to the pilgrimage—a route that required making your intention for Umrah, or what her relatives affectionately called the "little hajj." They landed in Cairo, the designated miqat—the final point before the country of pilgrimage, where you could don both your attire and intentions.

And after the required shower prior to donning ihram—the uniform, more or less, of the visiting pilgrim—which felt to Hafsah like a quick wash behind the ears in a crowded airport shower room, they all milled into a makeshift masjid room, where she tugged awkwardly at the white prayer gown her mother had carefully chosen for her. She tried yet again to focus on her prayers.

As she spread her wide skirt to cover her leggings and felt the last droplets of water rise up in steam from the nape of her neck, Hafsah found it hard to believe that this was the first step in accepting the invitation. In order to proceed to Makkah, you had to settle on your resolve and wash away your uncertainties. But she still felt so far from where she was supposed to be. Or assumed she was supposed to be.

One of her cousins had told her that she would feel it once she was there, or at the very least, when she was clad in her ihram—when the entire group had transformed from mild-mannered acquaintances from the community into white-clad, solemn-faced pilgrims worthy of a double-page photo spread in the latest glossy issue of *National Geographic*.

You couldn't really feel like a pilgrim, either, when you were in an airport full of stuffed-camel stall shops, designer duty-free chocolates, and abandoned iced coffees littering the sides of conveyer belts, melting mournfully in the rising heat. At least the temperature did justice to her expectations. She was grateful for her white gown and winced in sympathy for a girl in the group who wore a gorgeously embroidered black abaya already clinging like snakeskin to her damp arms and hands. She leaned on her mother and picked her way out of the prayer room over the nest of shucked-off shoes.

Hafsah's own mother was still prostrating herself, whispering

supplications under her breath. Hafsah spread out her legs and watched It crawl over them, languid and winded, trying to find an inch of coolness to nestle into. She was bitterly pleased when It could not. It had made the journey miserable, after all.

It seemed like the invisible boundary of the miqat had its limitations after all. Hafsah had, rather hopefully, pictured the miqat as a mesh silver net that would glance over her shoulders, briefly languish on them with a comforting, sympathetic touch before dropping over her unwanted companion, ensnaring It while she walked away to her pilgrimage, light and free.

Of course that wasn't the way it went. Of course, when Hafsah took to her feet, grasping her mother's heat-sticky hand, and headed back toward the gate and onto the next plane that would land in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia—home of the hajj, the place of the invitation—It came right after her.

At least the second plane ride, for all its migraine-inducing roar and lukewarm meals, brought Hafsah some clarity. The idea that there might be some sort of invisible, high-quality force field that would keep It from following her over that axis between high school student and appropriately washed and dressed pilgrim, however appealing, had been disproven. As she leaned on her mother's shoulder, It prowled between her ankles, restless, seeking some sort of softness on the carpeted floor. Could she leave It here in the airport, languid and lost?

"Make sure everything is properly tagged," her mother had mumbled back home, back in that final flurry of packing and sitting on suitcases to will them shut, fidgeting with the oversize pashmina one of her teary-eyed sisters-in-law had slung over her shoulders while blubbering something about being careful and staying together.

It had been hard for Hafsah to feel the appropriate gravitas in that moment, considering that her aunts were always watery eyed and wailing for any occasion, whether that was due to a visit to a distant relative or to a discussion about a marriage proposal that would likely not be accepted nor discussed ever again.

"The last thing we need is for you to find that your spare clothes went to Japan instead of Jeddah once we've landed."

It had curled around Hafsah's ankles as she dutifully wrapped a band of plastic around her duffel bag and tied it in a knot. She had looked down at It, wondering if the sideways glances around her would become harsher, less polite and distanced, if she wrapped a label around It, too.

She tried her best not to lay claim to It, as much as others seemed to want

her to. Most advice (from her doctor, from her friends, from the teachers who attempted to be approachable and sympathetic at school) went along the lines of “own It so It will have less control over you” or “at least name It so that you can face It.”

Now, as they deplaned in Jeddah, Hafsah was grateful she had ignored the impulse to tag and collar It. She raised her head, straightened her shoulders, and turned her back on It.

One way or another, she was going to leave It behind.

One way or another, she was going to find a way to confirm that this was an invitation without a plus-one.

* * *

In the hotel lobby at Makkah, Hafsah resisted the temptation to plop down on the marble staircase like some of the teeny kids in the group had, while they waited for room assignments. The children were both eager and anxious about the escalators going to ground level, directly aiming pilgrims and their purpose toward the extensive grounds of the Haram, the entire complex surrounding the Kaaba and its masjid.

They had mere moments to enter their room before Fajr prayers would begin. The room was an elegant chamber with wooden separators that slid away to reveal their beds. The large-windowed living room provided an impeccable view of the road, teeming at all hours with people from different countries and walks of life. Each person was new to this ground and walking timidly, looking around in awe with their suitcases heavy in their hands.

The building just across the road proudly bore the Indonesian flag; an alleyway down, signs suggested a row of restaurants—American head-to-head with savory international offerings, McDonald’s sharing space with a small Turkish café and a Bangladeshi restaurant that lent familiar spice-laden aromas to the humid air. A sense of community would be established between them within a matter of days. The groups that had arrived earlier already seemed to have their footing—striding together, giddy and beaming, toward the lit path into the sacred place of worship.

You could feel the gravity here, Hafsah realized later, her mind pulled along with the swell of the crowd. She glided off the hotel’s escalator and onto the road herself. She had shed her bags and useless winter coat of the East Coast, and now her ihram dress clung to her legs like a shroud. It was just like the Day of Judgment had always been described to her: a mass of people rising from the earth, from the soft, tense waiting of death, to meet

their Maker. Everyone surged together, in similar clothing, with an air of expectation, yearning for fulfillment.

It was evening, and yet there was an intense flocking of people. As Hafsah drew near to the Kaaba, it grew harder to walk without apologizing, offering smiles where words wouldn't be understood, because you had crossed paths with someone at the wrong moment or stepped in front of them as they offered up their supplications and lowered their head to the ground.

Hafsah and her family worked their way through the lowest level of the Haram, picking a bare spot of carpet just in time to join the Fajr prayers. Even from there, Hafsah could hear the low hum of activity in the near distance: pounding feet, raised voices, conversations with one another, with the air, with the atmosphere, with God.

"Keep your eyes down," a sister from the group advised, "until the very last minute. When you first see the Kaaba, they say whatever prayer you ask will be answered."

Hafsah hoped she did it right, because the prayer was already tumbling around her mouth like a rock in need of polishing. It jittered out of her lips and mixed with the salt of her tears as she finally saw the Kaaba for the first time outside of postcards and framed paintings. It was everything she had ever expected and something else entirely all at once: a humble building of dark brick and pristine black covering, imposing and square in the middle of all the activity, surrounded by a thousand, hundred, million white-clad bodies.

It was there.

She was here.

And so she prayed.

Please.

If I am meant to be here, show me that I am.

If I am meant to be here, show me how I can rid myself of It.

* * *

They had completed the rites of Umrah the first night in Makkah—running back and forth between the hills of Safa and Marwa, paved over now for the sake of modern convenience, and doing the required circulations about the Kaaba.

Afterward, Hafsah and her family had taken a brief sojourn to Madinah, taking advantage of the few days before hajj formally began (and the period after Umrah in which ihram could be withdrawn for other clothing), offering their greetings to the Prophet's resting place, seeing historical sights from the

vantage point of a barely air-conditioned bus and cheap, quickly bought sunglasses from local vendors.

After that, they moved back near Makkah, into the apartment building provided for the group, from which they were dispatched for the next few days to the camp on the outskirts of the city, at Mina, where every pilgrim must stay to fulfill their journey.

But for now they had access to the Kaaba again, and Makkah, even if it was a few miles' walk. Hafsah was still able to make her rounds of tawaaf about the building, and it was there—the second time around, separated from the initial hubbub and cluster of bodies that had distracted her upon her first arrival at the Kaaba—that she noticed.

It couldn't keep up with her.

She had glanced down, realizing her feet felt far too light, considering the usual restraints upon them: Crocs, socks, and It trying Its best to cling about her heels.

And It hadn't been there. Of course, a moment later, It had darted up, curled against her shin, acted as though nothing had been wrong—but Hafsah was not imagining the heaviness of Its breathing, the fast movements of Its sides.

The crowd around the Kaaba itself was too soupy and stubborn to bear during the highest hours of traffic in the day. The third floor of the overarching Haram complex that housed it was the best place to keep eyes on your intention and have your feet soothed by the tiled floor rather than dangerously scorched, especially just as dusk fell and the peace of night spread itself over the relieved earth.

There was pressure from all sides to keep moving, though, at any place or position in the Haram. You had to keep praying, keep your eyes forward.

And, increasingly, It couldn't dog her heels.

It always had been able to, from crowded cafeteria lines to Eid prayers in the masjid. It had been able to hang on her shoulder as she played basketball with her older cousins and remind her It was there at a family wedding reception, shattering two of her favorite bangles on her arm with a careless swipe.

But now, It—

It had almost vanished.

Heart in her mouth, Hafsah cleared away from the crowd, heading toward the fountains that were always stocked with the sacred Zamzam water for which Hajar, revered wife of the prophet Ibrahim, had begged God for

sustenance to provide her infant son Ismail. Hafsah took a paper cup in hand and glanced back at the crowd.

No sign of It.

One minute.

Two minutes more.

And then It darted out, shaking itself and fixing an accusing eye on her face. It was finding it harder to stay as close to her as It wanted.

Hope buoyed her heart. Maybe this *was* the purpose of the invitation. Maybe this was the way It would be left behind once and for all.

* * *

A few days later, Hafsah was moving past the early awkwardness of the closer quarters in the camp at Mina—lumpy mattresses on a tent floor, sleeping with her scarf on as she was in ihram, and getting used to the insistent scratch of her dress—and it felt like everything and nothing had progressed all at once.

They had proceeded from sleepless nights in Mina and the overwhelming vastness of Mount Arafat into following the prophet Ibrahim's footsteps and casting stones at the temptations of the devil. Each pebble glanced off the gathered pillars, little flint sides clattering and casting downward into the overflowing pile already created by previous groups of pilgrims. A few, shot from the other side of the wall, just narrowly missed her cheeks, but those were already stinging from the heat, and Hafsah would have hardly felt them.

It wasn't working.

Another reach into the stretched, drippy plastic of the ziplock bag, another snaggletooth of a pebble finding its way between her fingers.

Aim—and there.

It just kept finding Its way back.

And she couldn't hide It, the way she thought she was—so foolish, thinking she had any power over It, instead of the other way around. Not here, in this throng of people, and definitely not back in the camp at Mina. The tent was too small, too acrid.

There was an incident with the displaced duffel bag, too. She had lost her temper, probably making everyone around her think her mind had snapped on its thread with hardly a frayed fiber to be found, over a simple lumpy bag from a discount store in Queens, until a gentle pair of hands she couldn't recognize had pressed its familiar shape into her arms. And then there was the aftermath—her mother flushed with embarrassment, forcing a smile, saying that it happened sometimes when Hafsah didn't eat on time.

Before the stones and the pillars, when they had observed the sacred day that cemented one's hajj upon Mount Arafat—the hill upon which everyone would be called for Judgment Day, the day of fervent prayer and continued sermons—It had worsened, pummeling her belly, and a continuous drum of complaint at her temples that forced her to lie down on the tent floor as others prayed and read from their Qur'ans around her, her mother's hand concernedly stroking her back.

Afterward, on the train ride to Muzdalifah, where they would spend the night on the ground looking up toward the stars, she tried to kick It under the seats before she disembarked, lose It in the crush of bodies and handbags, almost in tears when It sidled in and out of crossed legs and tangled arms to tag happily behind her as they made it to the pillars where the devil had to be stoned.

It wasn't working.

Hafsah's fingers grasped empty air. Her allotted pebbles for the day had run out. Her father's hand was on her shoulder and the ziplock bag containing her reserve pebbles within his grasp.

"We're walking back to camp now. We have to come back tomorrow, too."

The days were trickling through her hands just as quickly. There would be no confirmation, no flickering red banner in the sky like her grandmother's village had once believed would signal the acceptance of a pilgrimage. There would only be the trip back to the States, the barely cooked meals she wouldn't even be able to stomach, the return home, and the giddy questions about how she felt, if she had changed at all.

No one would ask what they all really wanted to know:

Did you pray enough?

Did you finally bow your head low enough?

Did It leave you the way It should?

Her lungs loosened at the seams, little puffs of breath easing out of her lips.

* * *

Another round past the green light that indicated a new tawaaf, another glance over her shoulder into the mass of white-clad bodies and devoutly moving mouths. The world cascaded over Hafsah in waves: united breath, flickers of movement, raised hands, and lowering legs. She had made it here, through so many tides, through the long aching walk back to the apartment building in Makkah, through the second round of rites made familiar by Umrah—back

and forth between the hills, flanked by elder women whispering prayers and confident young men who speed-walked through their obligations.

She was one of them and she was not, easing forward past older pilgrims and ducking under the arms of boys with scraggly beards who stumbled over their newly memorized invocations. Tears stung the corners of her eyes as she padded onward, fast as she could, through the increasing crush of bodies, jostled and apologetically patted with hands she could hardly feel.

Was It still trying to mark her, trying to make out the pattern of her scarf, the way it was rising up—she could feel it by the reassuring fingertip of air brushing over her heated neck—to expose an inch of her braid, attempting to differentiate her from the rest of the evening's faithful?

It couldn't. It couldn't possibly.

Her steps quickened. She wasn't planning to rush, but now she was, doing her best to keep her feet moving while nearly staggering forward into backs or around arms stretched out and upward to Heaven in supplication.

Not here, not now, not when she was still trying to do it right, still trying to work out the words she'd pressed into her heart like a tender leaf between a steadying book's pages. Her parents must be somewhere far behind now, perhaps starting a new tawaaf, perhaps clucking over her impatience and standing in a distant corner of the Haram, squinting down at the barely lit screen of the anachronistic cell phone to make out the string of numbers that meant a connection to her somewhere in this oversize mass of humanity.

Even her parents couldn't possibly recognize her out here.

Even It–

No. It was not here.

Hafsah felt her heart rise in her throat.

This was it. Within the last dregs of the divine experience, the last days, hours, moments before she would take off her pilgrim's shroud, lay down her obligations, and return home—to her own world.

This must be the right moment, the right time, the right way to make her escape.

This was why God had invited her. She was sure of it.

This was how she would be rid of her plus-one.

The thought made her catch her breath. She slowed, raising her head, finally, properly looking at her surroundings. All around Hafsah were her people: scarf clad, humming with the ritual, exchanging soft smiles and prayer books when a word was faltered on. Water bottles were passed between hands without a mind for whose mouth had previously touched it.

The sky was dark—not bruised purple, not the color that she saw behind her eyelids late at night when she had hardly any sleep from the last bus ride—but a vivid, deep blue. It felt as though it was a curtain, lowering to gently brush against the scorched earth with the evening breeze.

She was one of them, and she was not. She was her own person, still Hafsah in her squirming, awkward skin, but … calmer now that she had realized she was Hafsah alone, without the anxious parents, without the cautiously accepting group—without It. The world had quieted for her. She could step in time now, feel the slight bruising of her heels as they came down on the marble floor that, moments ago, she had been skittering over.

Hafsah turned her face upward and breathed.

The moment was not perfect. Time did not entirely stop. She could feel the tight, too-far elastic creasing of her lungs and the bloom of sweat on her neck and wrists. She was aware now of the insistent buzzing of her cell phone where she'd plopped it in between her stern-faced ID and group wristlet in her pouch.

But there was something different now, richer, in not being able to be picked out, singled aside—draped in white, stepping in time with some bigger rhythm. An elder Chinese couple caught her eye, bowed their heads slightly, murmured the words that, regardless of language, she could understand: *Peace be upon you*. A little kid behind her, half-asleep but still determined to finish his rounds of the Kaaba like a big boy should, almost stumbled into her legs.

She wasn't alone in imperfection, at least.

She wasn't alone in shy uncertainty, being sure to finish the rite because you could not tell at what moment you were supposed to feel the rightness and acceptance. You followed the rites because God wished you to, to draw closer to your fellows on the road and in buses and circling the Kaaba in a unifying goal to be part of your faith in a way you usually could not grasp—but at no point were you assured that this was the stopping moment. You carried on your supplications and hopes and prayers right back to the airport.

She wasn't alone in being worried about not fulfilling an invitation that you could not see, or hold, or touch, but had to rummage through your heart to find some semblance of reassurance that you hadn't come all this way—on a round-trip ticket and an overfilled suitcase—for no appropriate reason.

She looked down then and turned around.

She still couldn't see It.

For once, It had not darted back in place.

It was gone.

A tremor went down her spine. She halted, barely aware of the clucks from a group of Malay women behind her, hands tightly gripping one another as they bobbed in and out with their neon flowers stuck to their hijabs. She glanced down at her socked feet, stepped a little farther out of the current to pat at her legs.

Nothing.

For some reason she couldn't explain, bile rose in her throat. Had it always been that simple? Had she really been haunted, frustrated, lost in the middle of hallways both familiar and newfound, when this—prayer, the fulfillment of religious rites, perhaps an extra day or two of fasting after the boundaries of Ramadan—was the solution?

Or had she wasted so many nights tossing and turning when she merely needed to step on a track with her sneakers on and let the frustration bead up on her skin and shed off like poison dew, leave It somewhere in the space between the dust in her wake and the heaving of her breath?

The phone was still buzzing, an insistent vibration against her throat like the words that were clawing their way up: *my fault, again, my fault, it was just a phase, it was just me all this time, I could have gotten rid of It, I haven't prayed hard enough, I haven't fasted sincerely enough, I've glutted myself on self-pity and choked on my own sloth.*

She snatched it out and held it to her ear.

"Ma."

"Hafsah, where on earth are you? Your father is frantic, and none of the police here seem to understand which group we're from. We're in front of the giant crane near the third gate."

"I … I just…"

I should have felt better when I first got here.

I should have felt peace when I stepped on sacred ground.

You were right.

The invitation was meant for me.

I was wrong.

I am the problem.

Her mother was saying something about one of the sisters and her younger brother keeping an eye out for her, on joining in as a straggler in their united group and drifting back toward the road that would lead to the overpass, and then the sloping form of the apartment complex for the pilgrims.

Hafsah could barely hear her. She patted against her shoulders, absently,

tugged down her scarf. She tried to remember how many tawaaf she was supposed to make around the Kaaba, several floors beneath her. Had she done enough to say good-bye? Had she done enough to be rewarded with a sudden relief, an absence of the teary eyes and the sick-to-her stomach clench that she felt right now?

Was it really over like this?

And then she heard a soft sound—a little *whuff*, like a sneeze.

She looked down.

It looked up.

It had come back.

It had not really ever left her.

And Hafsah sank down to her feet and cried. She cried as an older woman pressed a hand against her back and clucked in Arabic, called to another woman, who pressed a crumbling date cookie into her fingers, closed them around it, smiled back as she choked out a shukran, put it in her mouth and let it clog her tongue, nodded to try to convince them that she was okay.

It stayed near, cautiously, perhaps a little frustrated at how long it had taken to find her.

But It still came back.

No matter how hard she prayed, no matter how much she ran.

Hafsah wiped her nose against her hand and glared at It.

This was her invitation. And It was the plus-one she had never asked for, had never needed. She had tasted, for one blissful moment, that inclusion, that oneness that she had been promised, what she had been called here to be part of.

And yet, It had come back. And perhaps, It would not leave.

“You can come back,” she told It, still choking on her tears and the damp mush of the cookie in her mouth. “You can come back, but that doesn’t mean I still won’t run. That doesn’t mean you’re meant to be here. That doesn’t mean I have to like you.”

She was probably getting a lot of weird looks, but she was used to that. At least It heard her. For the first time, It seemed a little drab and ridiculous, puffing itself up and snarling back at her—tiny, powerful thing that needed to dig Its claws in to try to remind her who was boss.

She was boss. It was her invitation.

Hafsah stood up, wiped off her face, licked the last of the cookie off her lips, took a sip from her water bottle. She started walking toward the exit, passing other bodies dressed in white, other faces turned yearningly toward

the sky.

It followed, as It always did.

This isn't the type of thing where you've been invited by mistake.

You were invited there.

This is for you.

Hafsah stepped a little faster, and It darted to keep up. She slowed, and It had to halt before It bumped into her legs.

This was for her.

It wasn't a mistake. That feeling that had been so buoyant, so calming in her chest, wasn't a lie.

This was why God had invited her. She was sure of it.

She was here to remember who she was: Hafsah, who had been given the beckoning forward in the name of faith and unity and belonging. She was here to remember that, no matter what It did, she was always Hafsah.

She was always here.

She could move beyond It. It might come back, but she could outwalk It. She could teach It the fear of not mattering, of not being seen, of being left behind.

Behind her, the plus-one darted uncertainly, trying to remind her of Its presence, inching closer to her heels. She didn't turn around.

The Day the Dragon Came

MARIEKE NIJKAMP

THE DRAGON RESTED. The tower wasn't ready yet. The city was still growing. Its time would come.

It stretched out, turned its snout to the wind, and waited.

* * *

Alix cursed. She had tied strips of linen around her ankles and used her cane to keep herself upright, but the narrow and uneven streets were a ruthless enemy. With every step, she felt sharp pain shoot up through her ankles and knees.

She was sure the city was built to torment her. For all the spells her grandmother passed on to her, there was nothing potent enough to deal with a city under construction. But the weavers' guild would not pay for delayed messages. She could not afford to be slow. They would simply find another messenger, and she would be no closer to paying off her bond.

So, with a hobble in her step, Alix moved along the warehouses at the Grass Quay, along the Leie and the crowded docks, along the winding streets, until she reached the tanners' guild house at the corner of the market square. When she called there, at least, she had a moment's rest.

A moment to snatch a crumbling piece of spice cake from the kitchens at the back of the building and eat it. A moment to breathe in the rancid air that permeated the guild house, as if the tanners carried it with them from the tanneries. Then one of the apprentices came down with a return message, grimaced at her cane, and sent Alix on her way again.

A moment was never enough for this hungry, greedy city. But she was bound to this town, and oh how she loathed it.

Alix dreamed of travel. She dreamed of seeing more of the world than just the dirty, crooked corners inside these city walls. She overheard Dean Vaernewyck talk of England, and she yearned to see those isles. She saw

traders from Africa and Arabia and she envied them. She wanted to taste the salty sea air and travel the rivers.

One day soon, she would escape—once the Belfry was finished. Because all townspeople knew that when the tower reached its summit, a copper dragon would come to town, ferried in over the Leie, escorted by the pride of the carpenters' guild. To the poorters of Ghent, to those who believed, the dragon would be a symbol of protection. It *lived*, it breathed, it would keep the city safe from all the dangers that threatened it.

To her, it was simply a weather vane. An opportunity. And all she needed to sneak past the city walls was to stow away on one of the ships, where no guard would see her.

She had too many dreams to be contained by city walls. Everyone here believed in dragons; she longed for flight.

* * *

Delfin had entered through Petercelle Poort, past Saint Peter's Abbey. Riding in the back of a cart filled with wool, toying with a piece of wood and a carving knife, he'd seen the landscape change, from the glowing fields to the vast, outstretched lands of the abbeys to the city proper. He felt the carving in his hands twist and shape and turn into the bell tower he wished to be a part of.

Those last few kilometers, he saw all of Ghent stretch out in front of him.

Before Delfin left his apprenticeship, Master Denijs had told him Ghent was the biggest city of the Low Countries, but it clearly meant to be bigger still. Buildings were crammed onto every inch of the hills. Spires and towers peeked over the walls. Even from a distance, Delfin would have sworn he heard the sounds of construction, smelled the wood and stone.

He had dreamed of coming here. He had dreamed of coming here ever since he was eleven and had cut off his hair and talked his way into his first apprenticeship.

"But dragons, Pa," he'd said.

His father had simply scoffed, "You'll never see dragons, girl."

Delfin refused the identity and refused to believe the scorn. He worked hard. He studied his maps. He knew where to go, and he followed the path he had laid out for over six years. And now he was here.

Once he said his good-byes to the cart driver, he walked the street that wound its way down to the towers of Saint Jan and Saint Niklaas, because he knew what he would find right between the two towers: a third. After almost

seventy years, the Belfry—the tall bell tower that marked the hours and dangers and life of a city—was nearly finished.

Delfin loved the way of bell towers, especially in proud cities like Ghent: Once it was completed, its dragon would be welcomed to perch atop the tower and watch over the entire city. To some, it might be nothing more than a copper figurehead, but Delfin knew what the presence of the dragon meant: Accomplishment. Protection. *Pride*. And Delfin would be part of it. Even if it meant carrying buckets of water for the masons or nails for the carpenters or cleaning the cobblestone streets with his bare hands, he would be there when the dragon came.

"Boy!"

A horse thundered past him, its hooves clattering across the road, and the rider cursed. "Stop dreaming, you fool."

He didn't need to. He would be there. He *was* there.

* * *

"It's the crippled girl of the weavers."

One of the tailor's apprentices made the sign of the cross and took another swig of beer. "Bad luck, a girl like that."

"Scoot." Another one spat at her, and they laughed. They always laughed.

Alix kept walking. She always kept walking. What else was there to do but walk and try—and fail—to forget their scorn?

So she walked until the sun set behind the towers, and bats took to the sky. Until she found a spot of darkness underneath the bridge that connected the inner city with the castle grounds.

Nighttime was the only time she felt at ease here. The intemperate city grew softer. The shadows lengthened, and the edges blurred. The sharp night air masked the most pungent smells. She wondered if this was what home was supposed to feel like: comfort—or something close to it.

Alix stretched, tendrils of pain shooting up through her legs and coiling around her hips and back. She walked too much most days.

She produced a paper bag filled with aniseed biscuits and pulled out the scraps of parchment she kept in her pocket. Her hands cramped, and her fingers clawed. She wanted to push her nails so deep into her joints that *that* would be the hurt. A pain that she could increase and decrease. A pain that she could control, instead of this unsteady burning from the inside out.

Some days the pain merely wore her raw. Some days, like today, the pain settled itself deep inside her and deconstructed her, whispered her failures, her

worthlessness, her despair. The last message she failed to deliver. The awkwardness when a girl smiled at her instead of spitting, and she didn't know how to respond. This pain was a treacherous thing, and none of her grandmother's spells could aid her in fighting it. None could smooth the rough stones or deliver her messages for her. None could make her feel at home here.

If she was honest, she often wondered if the spells did anything at all. Maybe they were like the bell tower's dragon—nothing more than hopes and wishes against a harsh world. But they were her only family possession, and they were all she had left when Dean Vaernewyck had bought Alix's bond and taken her in after the greedy city and its ruthless plagues swallowed her father and sister whole.

So she couldn't help but mutter the words. Her eyes settled on the worn parchment and the familiar words inked into its fibers. She began to recite. Spells of protection against an evil she could not see. Spells of healing that didn't alleviate her pain. Spells that might bring her friendship, though it never showed up. Spells that would lead her to her own path.

The dean had inadvertently taught her to do so when he paid for his servants to learn how to read, to learn how to pray. Fragments of Latin, no more. The benefit of clergy. But it was enough. The priests in the churches taught Alix that prayers were specks of light against the darkness.

So she muttered the spells. She stared at the stars reflected in the troubled water of the Leie and wished to be far away.

* * *

Master Denijs's word held good in this city. Delfin was the lowest of apprentices, despite being close to his journeyman years, there by the grace of his former master's recommendation. He slept on a bedroll in a wooden house on the outskirts of the city, far away from the stone towers where the poorters lived, but every morning he woke with the sun and went to work on the bell tower. He *did* carry buckets of water and clean splinters of wood from the building site. He lugged timber and nails. He worked until sweat ran in rivulets along his back, until his shoulders ached and his arms were so heavy he could barely lift them. And he saw how much the bells of the tower gave rhythm to city life.

Days passed, and the Belfry grew taller. Weeks passed, and Delfin grew stronger. When the bells rang to mark the end of the workday, he no longer dragged himself back to his bedroll. Instead he walked home by different

routes. Along the banks of the Leie, where merchants from across the continent did business. Around the castle that loomed over the city, while the stone poorters' houses faced it proudly. Past the chapel of Saint Michiel that stood directly opposite the church of Saint Niklaas. Delfin had always known Ghent was a town of churches, but he'd never seen this many towers. And everywhere he turned, the city breathed in deeply and expanded farther.

Ghent wove a home around Delfin, but it wasn't until the eve of the feast day of Saint Laurentius that the city claimed his heart. Or rather, it wasn't the city that did so, but the messenger girl who stood to the side of the square in the low morning light. She wore the colors of the weavers' guild and leaned on a crudely carved cane. She stared up at *his* bell tower with either wonder or fear, he couldn't tell from the distance, but then her eyes found his, and they anchored him like dowels inside a wooden joint.

Never before would Delfin have considered abandoning his work. But right there and then, he would've walked over had he not been up on scaffolding. Her presence called to him in the way she stood there, like a saint in the rising sun's halo, as she watched the Belfry with a skeptical eye and a prayer on her lips.

"Boy!" one of the master carpenters called down to Delfin, forcing him to draw away and climb higher with the ropes he was carrying.

From there, the tower and the work swept him up again, and when Delfin next found time to check the square, the sun was high in the sky, the church bells cascaded around him, and the girl was nowhere to be seen. And work absorbed him once more.

But when the sky changed to the burnt orange of dusk, Delfin climbed down the scaffolding and found himself across the road from her. She stared at him, then away, when he caught her eye.

The other apprentices passed them and called their good nights. They laughed at the girl or went out of their way to avoid her. Mathis—one of the senior apprentices—smiled at her. She didn't respond.

Delfin's eyes never left her. He crossed the narrow street to the point where the shadows of the three tallest towers crossed each other, and he smiled. "Hi."

"Hi." The girl looked paler now and pained. She'd pushed her long black hair behind her ears and held what looked like a message in one hand. The other clamped around her cane, where she flexed and clasped her fingers.

Delfin cleared his throat. "Are you looking for one of the masters?"

"No, I…" She pushed the scrap of parchment into her coat and seemed at a

loss for words. “You work on the tower?”

He glanced up to the magnificent high-rise, with the four small turrets surrounding the bells. It awed him. The Belfry was a beacon to the townspeople. Its bells shaped the days and the hours. And the beam structure, designed by one of the guild’s architects to cover the bell cote, was finally starting to find its shape. Pride swelled inside him. “Yes, I do.”

She stared at the tower in wonder, and that made her softer. Everyone looked at the tower with hope and awe. He wasn’t old enough to remember the plague that had swept through the city and the surrounding lands, but the fear still resided in many. A dragon would protect them from the sprites that caused the illness, from the war that raged south of here.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” he asked softly.

“It is.” It looked like she wanted to say something more, but instead she turned and fled.

* * *

Sunday was a day of rest to those who could afford it. Dean Vaernewyck could, and as such, so could Alix. Like all servants, she followed the dean’s family to church in the morning, and in the afternoon, she shared in a lavish lunch in the dean’s kitchen.

Still, relaxation was a luxury, and not one she appreciated. She’d rather work off her bond as fast as she could. She did not like to rest, even when her joints demanded she did. She didn’t want to be bound for years longer.

After church, she climbed up to one of the narrow rooms on the highest floor of the guild house. This attic was scarcely used but for storage. The windows, however, provided an excellent view of the towers and dragon perches.

Alix unfolded the parchment spells and stared. Spells of influence. Spells of love. Spells that gave her answers to her questions. But she hadn’t asked any.

When the carpenter’s apprentice spoke to her without mockery, kindly even, she hadn’t known what to say. She’d learned to expect scorn, because expecting anything more only led to disappointment. She didn’t know how to deal with kindness. Kindness scared her.

But she needed answers. She needed to know when the boats would sail west to bring home the dragon. If she stowed away before the day of the dragon, before the entire city celebrated the carpenters’ guild’s accomplishments, she could slip out of the grasp of her bond—slip away from

this place. At any other day, she would be too visible, and the guardsmen would know her too well.

She only had to muster up the courage to ask.

* * *

Three weeks later, the roof that capped off the bell cote was halfway finished, and the girl was back in the shadows of the square.

Delfin didn't simply carry water and nails anymore; he helped to construct and create. He worked on the tall beam structure that supported the bell cote and on the wooden supports inside. He was still not as broad as the other apprentices, but he had begun filling out and was growing more comfortable still.

And she was there.

She stood on the same point again, right across the street, where the shadows of the towers lined up. He'd seen her pass through on occasion, on assignment for the weavers' guild. Mathis managed to tell him she worked for Dean Vaernewyck, but he never got the chance to talk to her again, because he only ever saw her from high on up and she was far below, constantly moving.

Now she was there, at the edge of dusk, with her hair bound in a messy braid. She waited. She stood tall against the people who staunchly avoided her, as if they couldn't begin to touch her. And that, more even than her unguarded curiosity, appealed to Delfin. He recognized that determination.

Mathis saw her, too, and grinned. "Go on then. I'll cover for you."

"Thank you."

Before Mathis could answer, Delfin climbed down the wooden ladders along the scaffolding. He kept his head down when he passed one of the masters and swore when he caught his hand on a splinter, and all the while keeping his eyes on her. Hoping she didn't disappear.

Finally he jumped down in front of her. "Hello again."

"Hallo."

"Can I help you?" Delfin didn't know what he expected, didn't know what to ask her, exactly. And she didn't seem to have an answer ready, either.

She cocked her head. "What's it like, working on the tower?"

"It's like coming home, you know?" He spoke without thinking, though he was only now discovering what those words meant.

And she stepped back, looked away. "No."

Oh. He recognized that pain so easily.

She opened her mouth and closed it again, and she grasped her cane a little tighter. Then she shook her head. “Never mind.”

She turned away, but he reached out and touched her shoulder. “Wait.”

She stilled and glanced back at him.

“I’m Delfin.” He held out his hand.

Very cautiously, she took it. “I’m Alix.”

* * *

From the perspective of a dragon, life exists where chance and predetermination meet. This meeting was, perhaps, a little bit of both.

From that moment, Alix and Delfin settled into a rhythm of happenstance meetings and purposeful meetings and unquestioned secrets and unanswered questions.

* * *

“May I take you to the market?” Delfin asked her a few days later. “There are aniseed-flavored biscuits and waffles. Mathis told me I simply had to try the waffles, and you know the way far better than I. Perhaps what I’m asking is, will *you* take *me* to the market?”

It was as simple as that. Alix had never said yes to that question before, but he’d offered her his hand and his name, and his joy was infectious.

Alix nodded, fighting a half smile. “I’ll show you the way.”

She took his arm and he bought her an aniseed-flavored biscuit.

* * *

“Have you seen the other side of the city?” Alix asked him next, tentatively.

“What other side?”

“The city that exists away from the busy streets, along the narrow paths and around the churches. The city that the servants know but the guild members don’t.” She leaned on her cane a little more heavily today, but that didn’t deter her from moving.

“We know more about the city than you think—” he started to protest, but when he glanced at her, there was just the smallest hint of a twinkle in her eyes. “Show me.”

So she took him to the abbey grounds and the hospitals, where the plague survivors lived and worked for the charity of the masters. She took him to the back alleys, where children played around ramshackle houses that looked nothing at all like the lodgings he had as a guild apprentice. She showed him

how the richest parts of the city—the poorters' stone houses—were only a heartbeat away from the forgotten parts. All the pieces of the city were building blocks that together formed a whole. Imperfect, but living, breathing, dreaming.

And Alix fit nowhere. Delfin could see she didn't belong in the poorest parts of the city, because she was a bonded servant, bound to one of the wealthiest men in town. In the poorters' district, she was a tangible reminder of the plague sprites, so even though the plague had nothing to do with her limp, people warded themselves against her. She was spat at and laughed at whenever she made her way around the guild houses.

"It's lonely, isn't it?" he whispered, after they sidestepped a group of children flinging scoops of mud at her.

She was silent. She remained silent for such a long time, he was sure she hadn't heard him. Then she said, "I don't know how to change that."

He began to speak, but she swirled around, and her eyes were like a smith's forge, fierce enough to bend everything to their will. "Let's just keep walking."

"Together, then."

* * *

"Where do you want to go next?"

"Anywhere."

"That's too easy."

"Everywhere."

* * *

Delfin lay on his bedroll. In the dim light of the moon, he used a small penknife to carve a piece of wood. He didn't know what he was making. He usually let the knots and natural shape of the wood guide him. But tonight he could only think of long black hair and stormy blue eyes that flashed whenever she spoke of this city. He recognized that feeling.

He knew all too well what it meant not to belong.

But these past few weeks together … he would build new walls around the city if it would mean keeping her close and spending more time together.

* * *

Alix curled up on her bed. It was late, but the pain wasn't so bad tonight. She noted the tendrils of fire that looped and curled around her hips. After using

her cane for another full day, her elbow and shoulder ached, too. She'd worn this cane ragged. She would have to find herself a new one soon. But she might be able to sleep for a change.

If she could silence the whispers in the back of her mind.

What would happen if she asked Delfin about the ships that would ferry the dragon in? Would he think their friendship was only because of that? Was it friendship? Was this what friendship felt like?

She muttered the spells like prayers.

What if she misjudged this feeling? What if she misjudged him? What if she *believed* in him? It *could* be friendship.

But what if she never made it out of here?

Her thoughts tangled together like the heavy ships' ropes on the side of the quay. Maybe her best course of action was to not ask him anything. Not yet, for risk of pushing him away. Not tomorrow. Maybe the day after.

* * *

Not the day after. Nor the next day. Or the next.

Not when the city itself kept twisting and turning around them, measuring time by the bells atop the Belfry.

Delfin and Alix measured time by the biscuits they bought at the market, by the hidden city she showed him, by the stories he told about his former master and the gossip she picked up in the dean's kitchen, by the messages she delivered and the support structures he built and the free moments they could spend together.

Not this week. Not this month. Not yet.

* * *

"Why do you love this city?" Alix was growing restless. Delfin was so comfortable here, she did not know whether she hated him or envied him for it. For all the time they spent together now, this distinction still chafed. Every time they walked the city, he showed her that he loved it as fiercely as she hated it. She'd taken him to her attic, and he seemed at home there, too.

He grimaced. "I never knew what it meant to fall in love, but I knew what it meant to create," he said softly. "Being here … I'm building. And I'm part of something greater."

He was an outsider, and yet he belonged here, while she was born here and had never found her footing. With every step she took, the cobblestones rattled her ankles and knees. The steep, rising streets mocked her. And the

cold coming in from the river settled into her bones.

“My sister was like that.”

“And you?”

“I can never forget that the city devoured her and my father.”

“The plague?”

She flinched. Nodded. “Yes.” The plague devoured them. The loneliness devoured her.

* * *

Weeks passed. The Belfry buzzed with excitement. The builders on and around the tower were at the same time exhausted and exhilarated. The Belfry wasn’t at all done yet, and the great council was already talking about expansions. The weavers’ guild wanted a cloth hall, according to what Alix heard from Dean Vaernewyck. The city wanted its towers to be higher and prouder.

But the bell cote at the top of the tower was finished. The day of the dragon drew near.

And all Delfin wanted was for the bells to ring, to release him from this workday. He wanted to find Alix.

* * *

She saw him coming, and she marveled how he fit here now. He walked as someone who knew his surroundings intuitively, sidestepping uneven patches in the road, dodging carts with market wares. She should probably teach him to be more wary of pickpockets, though; they hadn’t got around to that yet. She’d learned to use her cane as a weapon, but there were plenty of urchins with nimble fingers around.

She stepped into the shadows and waited for him.

The excitement from the Belfry site had cascaded down through town. With every message she delivered, at every guild house she visited, people were talking about the dragon now, in all the languages of the city. Even Dean Vaernewyck had mentioned to her in passing that when the mythical copper beast found its way into Ghent, he expected her to take the rest of the day off. But she needed more than that.

Delfin walked closer.

She couldn’t settle for this. She had to ask him. She had to know when the boats would set sail, *which* boats would set sail to carry the dragon home. That had always been the plan, after all. For all that she now smiled whenever

she saw him, for all that she felt a little lighter when he was near, this had never been about comfort. His kindness scared her. His friendship scared her. It was so much easier not to trust people, because at least she'd never be disappointed.

She told herself it had only ever been about escape.

* * *

He saw her fold back in the shadows. Pain flashed across her face, and her cane wobbled. She looked both lost and determined. She smiled much more easily these days, but that guarded look she'd worn the first times they had met was back.

"It's soon, isn't it?" she asked.

He walked with her along the Wheat Quay, where the imposing warehouses were stacked close and the river was ever busy. His fingers brushed her free hand, then he pulled away again. "Yes."

"And then the dragon will come?"

"Once we create a perch noble enough," he said, repeating what Mathis had told him.

"What does that even mean?"

His smile was crooked. "When the bell cote is finished and this section of the belfry is done. Then the ships will set out to Bruges to collect the dragon and bring it home."

"Out of the city…" She stared westward, and the tight set around her shoulders loosened.

"Alix, the guild masters know the dragon will cause a distraction. The council may be proud, but it isn't foolish. They care about the city's safety. They'll protect the boats. Ghent would be vulnerable to those who would sneak in." He glanced at her, sideways, not quite acknowledging her. "Or out. And the guild doesn't wish to be responsible for that."

There were unspoken words to his answer. A plea in his voice. *Please don't ask me.*

But her determination, he'd learned, was unwavering. Still her voice hitched. "Please. Please just tell me which boats. I'll find a way. I have to find a way."

* * *

He flinched, as if she'd hit him. Delfin had guessed her plan. And the pain that spread through her—the ache of her joints and the break of her heart—

was mirrored on his face. “You know I can’t.”

“You know I need to know.”

She reached out to him, but he stepped back and asked the question she dreaded most. The question she would’ve asked, too, in his shoes. “Was this the only reason you wanted to be friends?”

She should deny it. But she couldn’t.

“Please tell me.”

* * *

The city looked different when he ran back to his guild. Less like belonging and more like the city Alix knew. One that was hostile, all sharp edges and harsh corners. It reminded him of the home he’d left behind, and he knew, oh he knew all too well, why she wanted to escape, too.

But it hurt, it hurt, it hurt.

Back home, Master Denijs had been good to him, when he showed up on the carpenter’s doorstep as an eleven-year-old urchin. He took Delfin in and fed him and taught him. But whenever Delfin went back to his father’s house, to tell him of his studies and accomplishments, the door remained closed.

He knew what it was like to dream, and he knew what it was like for others to scorn those dreams and deny them.

He knew the cost of dreams. He knew the loneliness and the determination. He also knew the strength that came from fulfilling dreams—the pride that came from being a small part of a much larger construct.

But he’d learned what she hadn’t discovered yet. That escaping was easier if you could trust the kindness of strangers. Not those who wish to close off hearth and family, but those who wish to open doors. Not the ones who spit at you and beat you up, but the ones who would keep you from falling. The dragons, not the plague sprites.

* * *

It was night when Alix saw Delfin again. He’d come to her.

“Please stay.” He spoke so softly, she almost wasn’t sure she’d heard him correctly. He leaned against the bridge, hidden by the shadows she would usually wrap herself in. He looked so fragile. He looked like she’d felt, the first time she’d talked to him.

“I can’t. I…” She closed her eyes for a moment and tried with all her might to pull herself together. “Please don’t ask me to stay. This city is a cage to me, and I won’t be locked up here any longer.”

“Wait, then. Wait for me.”

Despite the late hour and the arrival of dusk, the quays around them were bustling. But none of the sailors on the riverboats and none of the workers in the warehouses minded the two of them. They packed grain and cloth and hummed rowdy shanties, while Delfin and Alix walked not quite hand in hand.

She didn’t want to point out the simple truth: that in the grand scheme of things, in the great design of the world, they’d only just met. They lived very different lives. For all the time they had spent together these past months, for all that they may both have fallen in comfort with each other, love was nothing more than a possibility. And possibility was an easier sacrifice.

Alix couldn’t bear to speak those words.

Delfin spoke for her. He pushed a strand of black hair out of his face, and his brown eyes focused on her. “We’ll pay off your bond together and then travel on. To the cities in the north. Across the sea. Wherever you want to go.”

She winced. “You are at home here. You shouldn’t give that up for me.” She sat down in a shadowed place near the bridge. She cradled her cane close. Even here she heard the sound of construction, though in this case it was a chapel, not a belfry. “And I don’t know if waiting is enough for me.”

* * *

Delfin tried to follow her gaze, but she stared into the distance, and she seemed to be kilometers away from here. He couldn’t ask her to wait again. He *wanted* to. He knew that dreams lost some of their shine without a means to share them, and a home was empty without a heart.

But he would not stop her.

“Think about it, at least? If you do try to leave, don’t go without saying good-bye?” He’d fallen for her. Hard, like a beam off the scaffolding. But if he loved her, he could never bind her.

She bit her lip, and then she nodded. “I promise.”

And—before he changed his mind—he told her what he’d gleaned from the masters’ comments, from gossip around the Belfry. Then he walked away.

That night, he started carving a new piece.

* * *

The day the dragon came to town, all of Ghent assembled around the Belfry to watch it find its place on the tower. The streets were crowded from the city

walls to the quays, from Saint Jan’s Church to Saint Niklaas’s.

From high upon the dragon’s perch, everyone in town appeared equal. The priests and the merchants. The weavers and the smallest guilds. The pickpockets and the poorters, in their houses of stone. To the dragon, they were all puny and fleeting, their lives too short compared to the lifespan of towers. The builders who had envisioned the Belfry had not lived to see it come to completion. The builders who had finished this stage of the Belfry would not live to see the cloth hall erected next to it.

And yet. They would continue to build.

So the dragon would guard them. Priest and poorter. Weaver and pickpocket. Merchant. Messenger. Carpenter.

* * *

The sound outside cascaded like waves against the guild house. It rose and ebbed as the dragon made its way from the city gate to the Belfry.

Delfin knew it was his right to be there. He had helped create the wooden tower where the dragon would rest.

It was his dream to be there. Or at least, it had been. But he was preoccupied by everything that hadn’t happened this past week. He hadn’t seen Alix. He hadn’t heard from her. He had wanted to give her space, but that space felt like a prison to him. He’d kept himself busy.

But now he had to know if Alix was still there. Alix with her smile as bright as lightning and eyes like a thunderstorm. If he hadn’t heard from her, perhaps that was a good thing. His heart hammered in his throat as he walked up the stairs to her attic.

Perhaps she was still waiting. Perhaps she could show him where to go next, or he her.

Perhaps—

* * *

Alix turned to him. From their vantage point high up in the guild house, the tower of the Belfry peeked just across the roofs, but Delfin didn’t even glance at it. He kept his eyes on her, and there was so much hope in his gaze. All she could offer in return was fear and her presence.

She had meant to stow away. To mutter her spells, hide in the belly of a ship, and hope for the best. But something had stopped her every time. Maybe it was the fear of being caught. Maybe it was Delfin’s warning. Or maybe it wasn’t just about escape anymore.

She didn’t know if this was what trust felt like, but maybe that didn’t really matter. Because they were here, together.

Delfin offered her what he was holding: a strong wooden cane wrapped in clean linen. One by one, she removed the rags. The cane was carefully carved, with fine lines running along the shaft.

She pulled back the cloth that covered the handle and paused and stared.

A finely carved dragon’s head.

The handle was a work of art, better than anything she’d seen Delfin create over the months. The wooden dragon had a pointy snout and pointy ears, with beady, intelligent eyes. Its scales ran all the way down to its neck, and it seemed to smile.

“I was hoping you’d still be here. The city has its dragon. If you’re to travel the world someday,” Delfin said softly, “you deserve a dragon of your own to keep you safe.”

Around the Belfry, the crowd roared, as if the city itself approved of his words.

Alix wrapped her fingers around the dragon and tested her weight against the cane. The handle was the exact right height, the cane itself far stronger than the market-bought ones she’d worn down. She could lean on this without a fear of breaking. She could stand taller without a fear of falling.

“I never knew what it meant to fall in love,” Delfin said, the same words he’d spoken when he’d told her about his Ghent. “But I know what it means to create, and maybe the two aren’t so different? Creation is an act of hope. You start with nothing but possibilities—with planks and nails, with bricks and mortar, with parchment and paint—and you put them together in an effort to discover perfection. To find magic in the melding.”

“What if you never reach perfection?” she whispered.

“You keep trying.” He held out his hand to her. “If it isn’t love, then friendship. If it isn’t belonging, then at least it’s not being lonely anymore.”

The bells of the Belfry began to toll. Everyone on the square and on the streets that circled the towers held their breath as the gold-plated copper dragon was put on a wooden platform and raised upward.

They should watch.

But neither of them moved. Storm-blue eyes locked with carpenter brown. Alix leaned on her cane. And if the city held its breath for the dragon, it held its breath for this, too.

Alix stepped closer until she stood right in front of Delfin, until she put her hand in his. “I don’t know if waiting is enough for me. But I promise I’ll try.”

Delfin covered Alix’s hand and pulled her closer still. Closer, until they melded into each other. Until his mouth met hers, tenderly, carefully, questioning. And she nodded in reply.

For a small measure of eternity, it was impossible to tell where one person ended and the other one began. Around them, the city with its winding streets and steep climbs, its unforgiving narrows and its ceaseless ambition, shone and claimed them both for a little while longer.

* * *

“Where do you want to go when you’re done waiting?”

“Anywhere.”

“That’s too easy.”

“Everywhere.”

* * *

And high atop the Belfry tower, the copper dragon looked out over the cardinal directions. It guarded the long, meandering roads that led to Ghent and away from it, toward the salty sea or deep into the mainland. It guarded the travelers who found their paths in and out of the city every day, who simply passed through or passed by, who planned to build new lives or escape old ones. It guarded the crossroads and the chances and all the choices along the way.

High atop the Belfry tower, settling in for the ages, the dragon smiled.

Captain, My Captain

FRANCISCO X. STORK

—TODAY IS THE day. Now or never.

That's what Captain America has been telling Alberto since 2 a.m.

Now it is time to get up. Baby Chato is crying. Alberto can hear him in Lupe's bedroom next door. Captain America told Alberto he could take Wayne's gym bag, and it wouldn't be stealing because Wayne pays him eight dollars an hour. Luis and Jimbo, the other members in Wayne's painting crew, get fifteen dollars an hour, and some of those hours are spent drinking beer and talking on their cell phones. Captain America wants him to pack his best pair of pants, a dress shirt, and his new shoes along with some everyday clothes. There is a spiderweb in the ceiling of his room where two walls come together. Not once has Alberto seen the spider, even though flies get stuck there and are eaten.

—A well-dressed person can survive on the streets longer than one who is not. You can walk into a supermarket and take enough to live on if you don't look like a bum. It's not stealing, because you will write down whatever you take and pay them later.

Alberto can tell the spider eats the flies that get stuck in the web because he can see pieces of wings and tiny black legs. Captain America refuses to speak to him whenever Alberto studies the spiderweb.

—I don't care for spiders and their traps. They are creatures of subterfuge.

Wayne's full name is John Wayne, like the movie star. Lupe calls him John, but everyone else calls him Wayne and he doesn't mind. Luis calls Alberto "Ventanas," which is Spanish for windows, because Alberto is the best when it comes to painting window frames. Alberto paints the frames so carefully they don't have to put tape along the edge of the glass.

—That's no way to live. Stuck inside a room, moving a brush up and down, back and forth, ten hours a day.

Baby Chato's cries are louder and more desperate. Alberto throws the

covers off and puts on the white overalls on the chair next to his bed. The door to Lupe's bedroom is open. He peeks in and sees Wayne facedown on the bed wearing nothing but boxer shorts. He's clutching a pillow over his head. The side of the bed where Lupe sleeps is empty. Baby Chato stops crying as soon as Alberto lifts him from the crib.

—It's Wayne's baby, not yours. Let him take care of it.

There's a tattoo of an eagle on Wayne's shoulder. The eagle is like the one on the back of quarters.

—That's a bald eagle, the symbol of our nation. It stands for freedom.

Alberto holds baby Chato against his chest. The diaper is heavy with pee. There's a changing table next to the crib, and Alberto changes the diaper there. The talcum powder reminds him of the way his grandmother smelled in Mexico.

—The gym bag is in the closet, and Wayne is not going to lift his face from under that pillow. Grab it now!

Captain America can sound bossy. Alberto doesn't know why Captain America talks to him. He had never heard of Captain America, until one day two months ago there was a whisper inside his head: *I'm Captain America. I'm here to make you free.* Alberto was not afraid at first. Captain America sounded like his own voice. He was only scared when Captain America picked up the volume and sounded like someone else. Captain America's voice is both smooth like silk and cold like ice. After a couple of weeks Alberto worked up enough courage to talk back to him now and then when no one was around.

—What about the time you were coming back from Walmart and you yelled at me to leave you alone? The lady next to you almost knocked your head off. That'll teach you.

A few days ago Alberto finally stopped asking Captain America to go away. Captain America only got louder and more persistent the more Alberto tried to silence him. The surest way to keep Captain America quiet for a while is to do what he says. Alberto tiptoes to the closet. Holding baby Chato in his left arm, he opens the door with his right and retrieves the red canvas bag. He checks to make sure that Wayne's head is still under the pillow, and then he walks back to his room and throws the bag on his bed.

—All right. Now we're talking.

Alberto stops and glances up at the spiderweb before he leaves his room.

Lupe is by the stove, warming a bottle of formula. Even from across the kitchen Alberto can see the dark circles under her eyes. She comes over and

takes baby Chato from Alberto. Baby Chato starts crying. She gives the baby back to Alberto, and the baby stops crying immediately. Lupe smiles, shakes her head.

"You got the touch, little brother." Lupe lifts the bottle from the pan of warm water and shakes a few drops of formula on her hand.

"I can give it to him," Alberto tells her. He takes the baby and the bottle to the rocking chair in the living room and sits down. Lupe grabs a can of Coke from the refrigerator and sits on the sofa across from Alberto and baby Chato.

Captain America wants Alberto to leave Lupe and Chato and live on his own. Out on the streets, where he will be free. Alberto likes that part, about being free. Being free, as in not being told by Wayne what to do and how to do it. Being free, as in making something he imagines out of clay. But who will help Lupe if he leaves? The only rest she gets is when Alberto takes care of the baby or when Becky from upstairs babysits.

—I never said it was going to be easy. Leaving the loved ones that are holding us back is the hardest part of being free. No doubt about it. It's not the only sacrifice you'll need to make.

"Did you forget today was Sunday?" Lupe points at Alberto's overalls. They are baggy, with paint splashes of different colors.

"I heard Chato cry for a long time." There was something else he wanted to say, but now he can't remember.

Lupe finishes his thought. "So you just grabbed what was nearest to you." She waits for him to nod. "I let him cry, hoping John would pick him up. But…"

—If you weren't here, then Wayne would have to step up. That man is using you and Lupe.

"Shhh!" he tells Captain America. Not that it ever does any good. The sound is out of Alberto's mouth before he can stop it.

Lupe turns to him with that look of hers. A few times now he's responded to Captain America in Lupe's presence, and each time she gives him that look, as if she's wondering. It is a worried look, but it is also kind. Luis accused Alberto once of having a couple of marbles missing.

—You're going to let that bother you? How many marbles is a person supposed to have anyway?

Lupe is saying something to him. He forces himself to listen. "… it's a place where you can make your own pottery like you always wanted. There are people there who can help you, or you can work on your own." Lupe takes out a torn piece of paper from a pocket in her pink robe. "I wrote down

directions for you. It’s not far.”

Baby Chato sucks on the bottle with his eyes wide open. His little finger tugs on one of the brass buttons of Alberto’s overalls. Like he wants to pull Alberto into the blackness of his eyes. Wayne came in late last night, and he and Lupe argued. Lupe wants Wayne to live with her full-time instead of coming in for a night or two whenever it pleases him. If Alberto leaves like Captain America wants him to, Lupe would be alone with baby Chato most of the time. And alone with Wayne. The memory of Wayne grabbing Lupe’s hair, yanking her head back when she was walking away from his angry shouts, comes suddenly to Alberto.

—We’ve gone over it a thousand times. Your sister chose her life. The time for you to choose yours is now.

“Alberto, are you listening to me?”

“Yes.”

But she doesn’t believe him, so she tries again. “I want you to change before John gets up, otherwise he’s going to put you to work. I’ll pack some breakfast and lunch for you. Go do something you like to do for a change. Go on—give me the baby.” Lupe makes a move as if to stand and then sits down again, folds her hands the way she used to when they were little and they knelt beside their beds to pray. “I’m sorry. I got you into this. I know you’re not happy.” She looks in the direction of her bedroom, where Wayne is pretending to sleep. “It’s still better than before, isn’t it?”

“Before,” Alberto repeats. When was before? Before they left Mexico? Or before Lupe met Wayne? There are so many *before*s Alberto couldn’t count them if he tried.

“We live in a nice apartment. In Queens. Not like that dump in the Bronx. We send money to Mami every month. Candelaria and Concepción and even the abuelitos. They live on what we send. You have your own room with your own color TV.” She stops, as if embarrassed. Just then she sounded a lot like Wayne, who likes to list all the good things they have because of him. Alberto touches the back of baby Chato’s head with his hand, and baby Chato smiles. “He loves you,” Lupe says.

Captain America is respectfully silent whenever Lupe speaks. Baby Chato’s real name is Chatham. If Wayne ever adopts him, like Lupe wants him to, baby Chato will be Chatham Wayne. The baby has brown skin like Lupe and Alberto, so he looks more like a Chato than a Chatham. When the bottle is empty, Alberto puts him on his shoulder and pats him. Soon the burp comes.

“Sunday mornings you go shopping and I stay with Chato,” Alberto says.

“Not this Sunday,” Lupe responds firmly. “I’ll get Becky upstairs to take care of Chatito for a couple of hours.” Becky is fourteen and is never mean to Alberto. She doesn’t call him names like Luis does, even when she catches him speaking to himself. Wayne spends a lot of time talking to Becky whenever Lupe is not around. “Go to the high school and watch the kids play soccer. You can’t stay here today. It’s not good for you to work all week and work on Sunday, too.”

“Chato’s not work.”

“No?” Lupe asks, and laughs. “Give him to me.” She stands and takes the baby from Alberto’s shoulder. She lowers him into a playpen beside the sofa, and baby Chato cries. “Go change. I’ll make some food for you, and then I’ll keep John busy so he doesn’t see you leave. Don’t come back up until this afternoon.”

Is it an incidence that Lupe wants him out of the house the same day that Captain America is telling him to leave?

—The word is *coincidence*, and no, there are no coincidences. Everything has been leading to this day. The forces of the universe pointed to this moment since the beginning of time. Lupe felt them coming and yielded to them.

Sometimes Captain America uses words Alberto doesn’t understand. That’s how Alberto knows it’s not him talking to himself. The other day Captain America called him recalcitrant. He had to ask Becky what it meant, and she looked it up on her tablet. She read to him: resisting authority or control, not obedient, refractory. Then she looked up *refractory*, which meant the same. Becky asked him why he wanted to know and he said it was something he had read, but she didn’t believe him. Becky knows he can barely read baby Chato’s books.

“Can I ask you something?” Becky asked.

He nodded.

“Why aren’t you in school? You’re sixteen. Shouldn’t you be, like, a freshman in high school?”

“I have to work,” he told her.

“Why? Doesn’t Wayne own this building and a few more like this?”

“I think so.”

She waited for Alberto to say more, but he didn’t. Then she said, “Wayne’s a creep. He gives me the heebie-jeebies.”

Alberto didn’t tell her he was not smart enough to go to regular school.

When Lupe was eight months pregnant, Wayne let them move into the apartment. The following week Lupe took him to the headquarters for all the public schools in Queens, where a nice lady took Alberto to a room. There he was given things to read and math problems to solve and circles and squares to figure out. Lupe had her heart set on Alberto going to the high school a few blocks from their apartment. But the lady told Lupe that Alberto had an intellectual and developmental disability. He belonged in a school where his special needs could be better cared for. She gave him a list of schools. Most of them you had to pay to attend. That night Lupe and Wayne had a big argument, and the next day Alberto joined Wayne's painting crew.

—Intellectual and developmental disability. Special needs. What the hell does that mean? Big deal! So you're not as smart as some average kid your age. Who cares? You got me, don't you? I make you special. There's the bag —now let's pack. Today is the day. Now or never.

There are voices coming from Lupe's bedroom, but they are not angry and that is good. Lupe left him a paper bag with two sandwiches. There's a Coke can and small plastic bag with vanilla wafers, which baby Chato also likes. Just before he steps out, Alberto looks back and sees baby Chato asleep in his playpen. Just because he packed Wayne's gym bag and has done everything Captain America has asked so far this morning doesn't mean he's leaving for good.

—It's a good first step. I'm proud of you, son.

He stands in front of the apartment building. It is June, and the days are warm but not too hot. If he sleeps outside like Captain America wants him to, he will need the brown sweater that's in the gym bag. The playground across the street at the park does not have one of those plastic tunnels that kids use to crawl from one end of the jungle gym to the other. Those tunnels are good to sleep in. Captain America pointed one out to him when he was driving with Luis to paint an apartment in Brooklyn, but Alberto knows he'll never find that playground again on his own.

—It's too early to start worrying about where you're going to sleep. You're outside. That's what matters. The day is yours. You're free. Can you feel how free you are? This is what I'm talking about!

Captain America is more pleasant outdoors. Trees, for some reason, lessen his power. Alberto crosses the street and enters the park. There is a bench under a giant oak tree, where he likes to sit and watch the geese and ducks on the pond. One day he saw a green garbage bag move by the edge of the water, and when he looked closer, he saw a turtle struggling to get out. The bag had

a knot at the end, which meant someone had tried to harm the turtle. The turtle scurried into the water when Alberto tore open the bag.

If he lived out on the streets, he could spend his days going to the different parks rescuing turtles. Captain America hasn't told him what he is to do once he's on his own. It is early, and there is no one on the dirt path that circles the pond. He finds the bench under his favorite tree and sits. The water in the pond is a deep green, almost black. It amazes him that there are ponds and trees and shrubs and turtles and ducks and birds in the city. Alberto reaches back and touches the bark of the tree. It is rough and old. He looks up. Branches that size with so many smaller limbs take dozens of years to grow. He learned that from his father. In San Antonio Chel, the town in Mexico where he was born, there were more trees than people.

—There's no going back now. Look ahead. The future is in front of you.

All the money that Wayne pays him, Alberto gives to Lupe so she can send it to Mami. Mami and Alberto's two sisters, Candelaria and Concepción, live from the money that Lupe sends every month. Lupe used to work as a waitress at a Mexican restaurant in Manhattan until she met Wayne. Wayne is going to marry Lupe and live with them full-time as soon as his divorce with a woman named Roxanna is final. Lupe wants Wayne to send Alberto to a special school, but Wayne says that's like burning money. Wayne thinks Alberto is one of the best painters in the crew. There's only three of them—Alberto, Luis, and Jimbo—but Alberto is the only one who doesn't complain about the job. The spiderweb in his room has 134 connected threads. It is a mystery how the spider linked the threads from one wall in his room to the other. When he counts the threads on the spiderweb, Captain America is silent. Wayne is probably looking for him right now. On Sundays, Wayne "rents" Alberto out to tenants to do odd things. Luis says that Wayne owns more than six hundred apartments, and there is no end to the painting. Whenever a tenant leaves, the apartment gets painted. But they also paint apartments with people living in them, which is harder. Luis listens to rap on his earphones while he paints. When Luis put the earphones on Alberto's head, the rapper's voice came from both inside and outside, like when Captain America speaks to him. It makes Alberto sad when Captain America insists that he leave Lupe and baby Chato. Lupe needs him, and Mami and his sisters back home depend on him. If he goes back home, Captain America will be disappointed in him.

—That apartment is not your home. You're living someone else's life. You're living for them. All of them. I want you to live for you. Are you

happy? Just answer me that simple question.

“It doesn’t matter if I’m happy.”

—That’s what people who are not happy tell themselves. Okay, forget about happiness. Just be free.

“What will I do … out here?”

—I don’t know what you will do. I can’t see into the future. Out here is the opportunity for something new to happen. When the thing that makes you happy comes, you can take it. Now you are free to look and wait and grab happiness when it comes.

“Lupe…”

—Lupe, Lupe, Lupe. Wayne, Chato, Mami, and all the rest of them back in Mexico. They are sucking the life out of you, and that’s the truth. Will you at least be honest with yourself?

“I don’t think of them sucking my life! I don’t know why you talk like that. I wish you’d leave me alone!”

A squirrel, startled, stands on its hind legs, looks at Alberto. It is the first time that he has lost his temper with Captain America, and Alberto is not sure what his reaction will be. Captain America says he wants what is best for him. He’s a friend, isn’t he? He’s kind, deep down. But he’s also powerful. There’s no question that he’s powerful. Maybe Captain is right. He should try to be happy. He was happy as a child in Mexico, making flowerpots and vases out of clay with his father, selling them in the marketplace. But that’s not possible anymore. He is not happy now. But he hadn’t known he was unhappy or that it was bad not to be happy until Captain America showed up.

—You’re afraid. I’m here to make you brave. You’re a man, not a worm.

“I’m no worm. I am brave … already. Please go away!”

“Alberto?”

But it is not Captain America talking to him. It is someone else, standing in front of him, a thin girl with a hoodie, holding a plastic bowl. It takes Alberto a few moments to recognize Becky and then a few more moments to realize he is not imagining her.

She sits next to him and places the plastic bowl she is holding on her lap. She’s wearing red shorts and a gray sweatshirt with a hood over her head. Becky has freckles on her legs. Her black sneakers are untied. “Bernie died this morning,” she says, removing a blue top from the plastic container and tilting it toward Alberto. Alberto sees a goldfish belly-up at the bottom. “I don’t want to flush him down the toilet. It doesn’t seem right. He was a good little fish. He was with me for two years. I thought I’d drop him in the pond.

It seems like that would be more appropriate, somehow. Don't you think?"

"Yes."

They stare at the pond in silence. Becky says after a long while, "His brain is probably about as big as a grain of salt, but I swear he knew who I was. When I came back from spending the weekend at my dad's, he swam around and around the bowl. Mom fed him while I was gone, so it was not the prospect of food that got him excited. It was me. What else could account for that craziness except he was glad to see me?"

"Probably he was."

"You think so?"

"Yes, I do."

Becky turns to look at Alberto. "Are you all right? Who did you want to go away?"

Alberto lowers his head, shakes it. "No one."

After a few moments Becky continues, "There were two of them at first. Bernie and his girlfriend, Bernice, but she died about a month after we brought them home. Bernie kept looking for her after she was gone. I mean, his fishbowl at home is not much bigger than this." Becky lifts the plastic container and then puts it down again. "You think he'd know she wasn't there. I mean, where could she hide? But he kept looking and looking for about a week and then went into a deep depression. He wouldn't eat, wouldn't poop. He kept opening his mouth like he couldn't breathe. I thought he was a goner, too. But he pulled out of it somehow. I talked to him. Just whatever came to my mind. Mom said that's what did it." She pauses. "I flushed Bernice down the toilet when she died. Dad said it was time for Bernice to take a ride down the porcelain express. He and Mom hadn't gotten divorced yet, and I still believed in his intelligence. He said it was either that or wrapping her in tinfoil and the garbage. I felt bad seeing Bernice swish around like a little orange caca."

The Spanish word makes Alberto smile. Becky knows a few Spanish words, which she practices on him now and then. "I'm sorry."

"That's all right. It's sad, but it's still funny." Becky stands. "I'm going to drop Bernie in the pond. Will you come with me?"

"All right."

They walk to the edge of the pond, and then Becky turns to Alberto. "Do you know any prayers?"

Alberto thinks. "I used to know some in Spanish."

"I think Spanish will still work. Do you mind? I'd feel better if I sent

Bernie off with a prayer."

Alberto waits, half expecting Captain America to mock him. Free people probably don't pray for dead goldfish. He is grateful when Captain America doesn't say anything. Becky bows her head, and Alberto starts. "Dios te salve, María, ruega por nosotros los pecadores … no nos dejes caer en tentación … mas libranos de todo mal … ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. Amén."

Becky empties the bowl into the pond. Bernie disappears immediately beneath the green surface of the water.

"I think I got a couple of prayers mixed up," Alberto says.

"It's still better than what I could have said. All I know is the Pledge of Allegiance, and I'm not sure that counts as a prayer. I'm basically agnostic. Adeeos, Bernie."

Becky turns and walks back to the bench, and Alberto follows. They sit with the gym bag between them. A breeze rustles the leaves of the oak tree above them. It is so quiet everywhere. It could be that Becky's presence has chased Captain America away. Would it be better if Captain America wasn't around? Yes and no. Alberto could get more sleep, for one thing. He could go on believing that life was hard and there was no use complaining. You take what is given to you. It's still better than it is for so many others. But Captain America is also a friend. Alberto has come to accept that. He wants things for Alberto that Alberto is afraid to want. There are times when Alberto knows that Captain America is there even though he is quiet. Was it wrong of him to tell Captain America to go away? Captain America didn't have to call him a worm and tell him to be brave. As if he wasn't. That was mean. What if Captain America doesn't come back? He'll be the same dumb Alberto who doesn't even know he's unhappy. Becky's goldfish sank straight down, but Alberto has seen dead fish float on the surface of the lake near his house in Mexico. His father told him they could eat a fish that floats if it didn't smell like rot or was too slimy. Alberto cuts his fingernails short so paint doesn't get under them, but Becky's fingernails are shorter than his because she chews on them. Alberto unzips the gym bag and takes out the paper bag with the lunch that Lupe packed for him. He offers a peanut butter and jelly sandwich to Becky.

Becky looks at the offering and shakes her head. "I'm not hungry right now, thank you," she says.

Alberto is not hungry, either, so he puts the sandwich back in the gym bag. Becky notices the gym bag as if for the first time but doesn't say anything. Wayne pays him eight dollars an hour, but Luis and Jimbo get paid fifteen.

That’s the kind of thing that Captain America doesn’t like and one of the reasons he wants Alberto to move out of the house. Lupe told Wayne that Alberto should get paid the same, but Wayne said that Luis and Jimbo don’t live for free in one of his apartments. Lupe and Wayne had another fight over what Alberto got paid, and Wayne shouted that he had never agreed to support two kids. Captain America told him that things would be better for Lupe if Alberto wasn’t around, but he is not sure. What if Wayne gets so angry he decides to hit Lupe one day? What if Alberto’s not around when that happens? How did the spider get a line of web from one wall in his room to another? Eight dollars an hour adds up to eighty dollars a day. It becomes more than four hundred dollars by the end of the week. Lupe sends half of it to Mami. The rest is for them to live on. What they don’t use, she hides under the mattress of baby Chato’s crib. Wayne will never look in there. Lupe is saving the money so that Alberto can go to pottery school someday, but also just in case things don’t work out with Wayne. Captain America told Alberto to take the money because it was his, but Alberto refused to do that.

He is thinking all this and doesn’t even notice Becky’s quiet sobs. Becky is almost a young woman, and he can’t touch her the way he touches baby Chato when he cries. Lupe says he’s got the touch. His father used to say that to him as well when Alberto made things out of clay. His father died when he accidentally touched an overhead transmission line. Now Becky is crying next to him, and he doesn’t know what to do. He wants to put his hand on the back of her head. When he touches baby Chato’s head like that, Alberto can feel the calmness leave his hand and enter baby Chato.

—She’s not your responsibility. It’s about taking burdens off your shoulders, not piling on more. Let’s move on. It’s time to meet the future. It will be hard going at first, but you will come out on top. You could have made it easier on yourself by taking the money that was rightfully yours, like I told you.

Captain America is there listening to his thoughts like he always is.

—And I will always be here. I’m here to make sure you live your life. I protect you from people sucking the life out of you. Get up. Let’s go. Now’s the time.

“He was just a silly little fish.” Becky sniffs, wipes her eyes with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. She lets one more small sob come out of her and then takes a deep breath. “Gosh.”

“He’s okay now,” Alberto says. His father was connecting an extension cable to the town’s electric lines so that the barrio where they lived could

have electricity. He had done that many times before. Every time the electric company discovered the pirate wire and cut it, his father would climb up and connect it again. A neighbor said his father was dead before he hit the ground. Sometimes when Alberto closes his eyes, he sees his father on the ground with little puffs of smoke coming out of his ears.

“Layla’s been wanting me to have a good cry. About my parents’ divorce. But I never could cry. And now here I am … bawling over a silly little fish.”

—Say some nice words. Time heals all wounds. The usual. You’re sorry about the fish. Then get up and go. She’s going to suck more life from you if you stay. I can feel it. Stand up. Now. Make something up, if you must. You must go to work. You’re late already and you need to go. There could be painting supplies in the gym bag for all she knows. Now.

Stop! Please!

Alberto does not know whether he spoke those words or simply thought them. He can feel Becky looking at him. He realizes his hands are over his ears.

He sticks his hands in his pockets. Becky continues. “My parents pay for me to spend an hour with Layla every week. She’s a psychiatrist. Her office is on One Hundred Sixty-Eighth Street, just a couple of blocks from here. She has two rooms that you get to from the side of her house. One where you wait for her and the other where she sees you. Her cat Pandora is sometimes there, next to Layla, sleeping on a fluffy cat bed. Sometimes Pandora will jump on my lap, and I just sit there listening to her purr. I don’t have to say anything if I don’t want to. I thought it was a waste of time. But they grew on me. Layla and Pandora.”

—I will not stop. I will get you to believe that what I say makes sense, because it is what you want deep down. You will finally understand and accept that you are privileged to hear me. I see what no one else sees in you. I see significance in you. I see the worth that no one else sees. I will persist day and night until you accept the value that is yours. I will persuade you to be who you are meant to be. You will no longer be the slave you are now.

“Layla says that I can come over anytime and see her, day or night. The door to the waiting room has a keypad lock, and she gave me the code. A light goes on in her apartment when someone comes in, and if she’s home or not with another patient, she’ll come out. She said I could come over in an emergency. Do you think the death of a goldfish is an emergency?”

“An emergency. Like a fire?”

“Sometimes it’s like a fire. Sometimes it’s like what Bernie must have

felt … like he was drowning in the same water he had lived in all his life.”

—Alberto. Listen to me. I have plans for you. I’m the only one watching out for you. I got your back—trust me. Do not go where this girl wants you to go. This is a trap. I can smell it. I hate traps, and one is being woven for you. You are being pulled into the enslavement of duty and routine where nobodies live. You can amount to something if you do what I tell you. Do not be a slave. You will have no life. You will lose it.

“No!” Alberto says. It is a loud no, and when he looks at Becky, he can see that he has scared her. “Yes,” he says, softly this time.

“No? Yes?”

“Yes. It could be an emergency.”

After a while Becky says, without looking at Alberto, “Layla speaks Spanish. You could tell her about whoever it is you want to go away.”

They stand up together. If they walk around the pond, they will come out on 168th Street. Becky pauses by the spot where she dropped Bernie.

Alberto reaches over and touches the back of Becky’s head.

Dear Nora James, You Know Nothing About Love

DHONIELLE CLAYTON

I DON'T DATE.

Well, I guess that's not exactly true. I choose *not* to date. Instead I choose to give love-and-dating advice through my column, "Madame Amour," in the school newspaper. I have become an expert without having to deal with all the roller-coaster emotions. Mom always says, "Nora, it's impossible to know a thing without doing it."

But I disagree. I do research. Romantic comedies. Romance novels. My friends and their drama-filled dating lives. Plus, everyone used to call Nana for love guidance, and she got most of *her* tips from the stories that came on afternoon TV.

So this whole thing is in my blood.

"You answering another letter, Lady Love?" Mom asks as she's prancing in and out of her closet, trying on yet another outfit for her second date with Mr. He's-as-tall-as-your-father-but-not-as-funny.

"I prefer the name Madame Amour," I remind her for the umpteenth time. "It's fancier. Everything sounds better in French." I'm sprawled across her bed, going through my Madame Amour emails and keeping her company as she dresses. She says having me with her keeps her nerves settled in this new "dating process."

"Okay, Nora Elizabeth James." She smiles at me through her vanity mirror. We could be twins—same golden-brown skin, button nose, and high cheekbones.

I'm all Mom. Except I got my dad's unfortunate round face and bad eyesight. So I'll basically look like a baby wearing glasses for the rest of my life. Nana says the plumpness in my cheeks will ward off wrinkles. Again, I disagree.

“How many letters do you have to answer?” she asks, then pivots to show me the latest outfit. “And what do you think of this?”

“Go for the red. It brings out the honey tones in your skin,” I say, then count the number of emails in my inbox. “Only four emails so far this weekend. I wish we were back in a time when people actually sent handwritten letters.” I look back at my computer. “But it’s been a slow week for love. January usually is. Lots of post-holiday breakups in the new year. ‘Too much holiday nesting.’ That’s what Nana told me yesterday.”

“Nana knows it all,” she replies.

“Yep.”

“Try having her as your mom,” she says with a sarcastic laugh.

Mom does a twirl. “How do I look?”

“Beautiful as always.”

“Do you and Indie have plans tonight? It is a *Saturday* … and you haven’t gone anywhere in a few weekends.” Mom always feels guilty when she goes out more than I do now that the divorce is finalized.

“No,” I say. “I feel an episode coming on. I need to stay home. Just in case.”

Concern fills her hazel eyes. “Did you take your meds?”

“Yeah, Mom, of course,” I say. “They just haven’t been working as well.”

“Should we go see Dr. Parekh again?”

“No … no … I’m fine.”

“Maybe it’s time for another—”

“Mom!” I bark, then soften. Tonight’s not a night I want to talk about bowel movements and cramps and pain levels and the inner details of my stomach disorder.

“I feel like I should be the one helping you get dressed for a date,” she says, now pinning up her freshly straightened hair into a bun.

“I already have one with *You’ve Got Mail*, these four emails, and a pint of ice cream.”

“That ice cream will—”

“Mom!”

“Okay, okay,” she says, leaning down to kiss my forehead. She smells like lavender and cocoa butter. “I should cancel this date. I could stay home and make you some broth. Or cook the collard greens I’d planned to make for Sunday dinner. The salt should help settle the cramping. Or I could make you some peppermint tea before I leave. You want that?”

“It’s fine. Don’t cancel. It’s already too late. He probably left for the

restaurant already. Don’t worry about me.”

“But I always worry about you. I’ve been worried about you for sixteen years. Ever since they first put you in my arms.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah…,” I say, trying to stop her trip down Sappy Road. “I love you too.” I scrunch my nose at her. “No kissing on the second date, all right?”

“Yes, my little love. You know best.”

“That I do.”

- - - Original Message - - -
Sent: Friday, January 7 8:17 PM
To: MADAME AMOUR
Subject: *Trapped in Casual*

Dear Madame Love,

I just started dating a new guy. He’s sort of perfect. Like everything you’d have on your PERFECT BOYFRIEND CHECKLIST.

-Handsome
-Funny
-Taller than me
-Great kisser

The only issue is—and ugh, why does there even have to be, like, something?—that he wants to keep it casual. See, he’s a senior, and I’m a sophomore. Most people would say that it’s too big of an age gap. But it’s only two years. Plus, my mom is three years older than my other mom, and they have a great marriage. Anyways, I’m not really worried about that so much as the casual thing. But my friends think the grade difference is why he wants to keep it “casual.”

I just really, really want a boyfriend. I like this whole having somebody to talk to thing.

What do you think? Is casual the new “relationship”?

Help!

XO
Trapped in Casual

- - - Original Message - - -
From: MADAME AMOUR
Sent: Friday, January 7 11:17 PM
Subject: RE *Trapped in Casual*

Dear Trapped in Casual,

I’ll use the famous words of my own Nana: “Never let yourself be someone’s warm-up band when you’ve made them your main event.”

Casual is another word for flexible, and flexible is another word for *not* serious.

You're in danger, girl. Watch the movie *Ghost*. Always listen to Whoopi Goldberg.

Run.

There are more boys out there. We actually have too many at Pinewood Academy. I wrote to Principal Wong about it last week. The gender ratio is unbalanced.

Sincerely,
Madame Amour

* * *

"Are we doing mac 'n' cheese today?" Indie asks as we snake through the hot-lunch line. Her long and shiny black braid hangs down her back like a snake, and a beautiful flower garland she calls a gajra is tucked on the side of her head.

"Do you want me to die?"

"Not today, no." She laughs.

I stare at the trays of fried chicken strips, frozen pizza heated up just enough that the congealed cheese doesn't look like gum, and some sort of breaded meat in a mysterious brown sauce. For a private school, you'd think we'd have a gourmet salad bar and a three-course lunch. But no. We have this. And it's terrible for those of us with stomach pyrotechnics.

"You're holding up *my* line," one of the lunch ladies says.

"Ms. Bernadette, I do this every time I forget my lunch. It's like my routine. You know that."

"A *rude* routine," she snaps back, further honing her reputation as the meanest lunch lady in the whole world. She doesn't understand how standing in front of this metal box of hell, aka a catering stand, triggers my stomach cramping. My anxiety holds me firmly in place. Feet glued to the linoleum. Brain a mess of thoughts about what I'll be able to digest without trouble. Embarrassment pooling in my stomach as I delay the lunch line and everybody stares at me.

I press a hand to my belly and take a deep breath. It feels hot and pulsating, like someone's inside me kneading my intestines with a burning rolling pin.

You're fine, I whisper inside my head. *You will be fine.*

Mom said half my disorder is in my head. Not in the mean way, like she's some sort of evil parent telling me that I made this all up. More like my stomach is my second brain, with enough nerve cells to be affected by my

thoughts. I have literal evil butterflies that beat drums in my stomach.

"And *why* am I supposed to deal with it?" Ms. Bernadette's left eyebrow hitches up, and she purses her thin lips. Her chalky-white face blushes with anger, and I brace myself to be yelled at.

"Do you have any of the mystery meat without the sauce?" I ask.

"It's meat loaf," she replies. "*No* mystery there."

"Do you have any sauce-less *meat loaf*?"

She exhales the deepest sigh, then pivots to head into the back of the kitchen area. She returns with a plate of gray beef that looks like a sponge. She hands it to me. "For you, princess."

"Not everyone can eat everything," Indie snaps at her. "Allergies, duh!"

"I've never heard of nobody allergic to meat loaf."

"It's the sauce. It's more pinkish than red, so I know you put cream and butter in it … but it's fine." I take the plate from Ms. Bernadette, curtsy like the princesses in the movies do, then grab a premade bowl of limp salad leaves.

"This is turning into the worst day. I knew it when I woke up this morning," I tell Indie.

Sometimes I wake up and just know it's going to be a rough one. I'll just be *off*—my nerves at the ready; my stomach tender, as if it's preparing for the pain; the anxiety ready to rise like water swelling up inside me.

We make our way to our usual table in the back left corner.

"I knew when you missed homeroom that it was one of those days."

I sigh. "Yeah, I had a bad episode this morning and couldn't leave on time. I'd get to the front door, and I'd have to turn around."

Indie's brown forehead scrunches. "Did you eat something bad?"

"Not this time. Wait. Actually. Scratch that. I had ice cream on Saturday. But, like, I already paid for that on Saturday night. Like two a.m. to four a.m. was not fun. But Sunday, I was fine." I shrug. "I think it's that midterms are coming up, and Ms. Córdova wants to talk to me about the direction of my column. And I'm just nervous. It's probably for no real reason." *And that's the worst part of this whole thing.*

Indie smiles at me like she always does when I unload like this. Her full lips become a stretched-out heart, and a worried flush creeps under her light brown skin. I hate that she has to deal with me talking about this all the time. But it's like a little cloud that follows me around; sometimes the sun shines through it and everything is okay, and other times it's full of lightning and thunder and the rain won't stop.

“So, there’s this thing I need to tell you.” The left side of her mouth curls up in a mischievous smile. “In morning homeroom, Marcus asked about you.”

“Ugh—”

She grabs my hand. “Just listen before you roll your eyes and get all mad. So, his friend Nikhil is going to ask me out today.”

“Oh,” I say, a little taken aback. Indie and I aren’t the girls who date. Since we got to high school, we’ve always been the friend sort of girls who just like to hang out. Indie’s parents are strict no-dating types, and I’ve just … never been that interested.

“He wants to go see the new Denzel Washington movie on Friday, but his parents are just like mine, so yeah, we can’t, like, just make plans.”

“Uh, you know I only see rom-coms in the theaters. Everything else is saved for streaming. Just tell Mum you’re going to the mall.”

“With who? I only go to the mall with you—and you know she’ll call your mom.”

“Oh, I know where this is going.”

“Wait! Just hear me out.” She grabs my hand like she knows I’m about to run far, far away. “I thought we could do, like, a double—”

“DATE! Nope. No way. Nein. I’m good with staying at home on Friday and answering Madame Amour emails.” I put my hands up in the air, ready to back away from this nasty sauce-less meat loaf, the table, and Indie’s wild idea. Me plus Dating equals No Good. It always involves eating and anxiety, and those two things make me sick.

“C’mon. I think Nikhil’s super cute, and you know, like, no one ever asks me out. Plus, Marcus isn’t *that* bad.”

“That bad? Only that he’s been a weirdo around me my entire life.”

“Only since first grade. And it’s a crush. So, sort of cute.”

“Oh, right, kindergarten stalking doesn’t count.” Marcus Washington III and I have always been in school together. He’s always the only other black kid. Always at my birthday parties. Always grinning at me. Our moms thought it was so cute. WRONG. He doesn’t care that I’m not interested. He thinks we’re meant to be. He thinks I’ll warm up to him eventually.

“He sent me love letters,” I remind her.

“In seventh grade, Nora,” Indie says, exasperated.

“Still.”

“Just do me this favor.”

“He’ll get the wrong idea.”

“Look, what if you don’t even have to sit with us in the theater? Nikhil and

I will sit together, and you and Marcus can be on different rows." She flashes her big brown eyes at me. The lashes curl up long and willowy like feathers. She's even prettier when she lays it on thick like this. "I feel like Nikhil might be my first kiss."

"Ugh! Do we really need first kisses?"

She leans in close and whispers, "You run a love column. Shouldn't you be all about it?"

"Maybe." The idea of being kissed starts the cramping in my stomach.

"Please? Pretty please?"

"Fine. Fine. Quit your begging. But just know, you owe me so big. Like do-my-whole-art-project-for-Sampson's-class kind of big."

"Yes. Of course. I will. Totally," Indie screeches. "Thank you. Thank you." She wraps her arms around me.

"Okay, okay. Don't say I never did anything for you."

"You're the *best* best friend ever."

"That's a lie. But whatever, I'll take it."

- - - Original Message - - -
Sent: Monday, January 10 2:13 PM
To: MADAME AMOUR
Subject: *Questioning Commitment*

Dear Madame Amour,

I've been with my girlfriend since sixth grade, and we're juniors in high school now. That's five whole years. I love her and she's great. Let me get that out of the way. She's a top student, super smart, a wiz at playing the cello, and very gorgeous. My boys say I'm lucky to have a girlfriend like her.

Now that I write this all down, it feels kind of stupid to be writing this email in the first place. But it's anonymous and the questions keep coming up, so I'm just going to go with it.

The thing is … I'm curious. I keep wondering what else is out there. And the weird thing is that it doesn't stop me from loving her and having a great time when we're together. I am a committed boyfriend to her. I would never cheat.

But I just don't know what to do with these questions and this nagging itch to meet other people and if I'm honest (and I fully admit it makes me sound like an asshole), kiss other girls. Is that terrible? Should I break up with her? Should I see what's out there?

I feel myself starting to pull away. She's flipped out on me a little about seeming "different." I don't know how to explain it.

What if we break up and I realize that the grass isn't greener?

Best,

Questioning Commitment

- - - Original Message - - -
From: MADAME AMOUR
Sent: Tuesday, January 11 8:22 PM
Subject: RE *Questioning Commitment*

Dear Questioning Commitment,

My Nana says, “There’s nothing wrong with looking, but touching will get everybody in trouble.”

Always listen to Nana. That’s my motto.

It’s natural to be curious and to wonder about what others are like.

I do think you owe it to your girlfriend to be honest. It might be time for a break. It’s unfair for your girlfriend to go along with you as you figure this out. She will be in limbo.

My dad did that to my mom before they divorced. Don’t do that. Don’t be like him. It leaves behind scars that are slow to heal. Also, if you ever want to be friends with her in the future, be honest.

Break up with her. Get the answers to those questions. You’ll be a terrible boyfriend if you don’t.

Sincerely,
Madame Amour

* * *

My dad sits across the table, peeking at me from above a dinner menu. His glasses keep sliding down his freckly brown nose, and he nervously pushes them up. He needs to get them adjusted. I would tell him this if we were still on friendly speaking terms. Right now, I use the fewest words possible around him.

“Finding something you can eat?” he asks timidly.

I let his question linger there in the air, building up tension and angst, and his discomfort. After they filed for divorce last year, Mom said I had to actively work on forgiving him. I had to let all of it go because it was just more anxiety to carry around, and my stomach didn’t need more of that. She said the custody agreement specified that I would split my time evenly between them. But this is the first time I’ve spent more than ten minutes with Dad since the summer.

“Some,” I mumble, scanning the dishes. I make a mental list of questions to ask the waiter, and all the substitutions I’ll need. I learned the hard way to be prepared when the waiter asks if you need help choosing an entrée. Nana’s advice always replays in my head, *Don’t wait until the last minute, and don’t*

be shy about asking for what you want.

"We can always go somewhere else."

"No, it's fine."

"Seriously, it's okay. I can get the waiter and grab our coats." He starts to raise his hand.

"I've found something, okay? I'll be fine," I snap without looking up from the menu. The words blur, and tears coat my eyes.

I take a deep breath. Sometimes I'm so angry with him that I can't keep it all inside. He broke up our family. He said he had to *chase love and a new opportunity*. He said *marriage is complicated*, and *these sorts of things happen*. He had to marry his mistress.

He deflates a little like a balloon with a pinprick in it.

The waiter returns and takes our order. I choose the baked chicken without the cream sauce and a side of steamed veggies. My go-to stomach-proof meal. I might even get to have dessert.

The waiter takes our menus. Now I can't hide anymore. My dad gawks at me, trying to read my expressions. I make sure to furrow my brow and purse my lips. I want him to feel confused about how I feel about him.

"How's school?" he asks.

"The usual."

"Your mom said your love column is going well."

"Yep."

"I think you should turn it into a book someday," he says with a smile.

"Thanks for the advice. I've *never* thought of that. Just only a thousand times," I say. "And Mom signed me up for a publishing program this summer in New York City."

"Okay," he says, and clears his throat. "You know Kim is from Brooklyn, so she could tell you where to—"

"I don't want to talk about her." *I don't ever want to talk about your new mistress wife.*

A tiny cramp starts to pulse in my stomach. I press my hand to it. *Not now.*

The meal comes. We eat in silence. I hear the sound of his chews, each one growing louder and louder. I imagine him sitting with Kim and laughing and feeding each other like newlyweds. My stomach starts to churn.

"Are you spending the night tonight?" he asks.

"Is *she* gone?"

"Nora, she lives there. She can't just leave when you come over. I need you to try to get to know her. She was already hurt that you didn't come to the

wedding.”

“I don’t have to do anything.”

He sighs deeply.

“Did you get a place with a second bathroom? I need my own bathroom.”

“Yes. And Kim decorated it.”

“How exciting!” I say, and push a piece of broccoli around on my plate.

“In order for us to resume our relationship, you’re going to have to give her a chance.”

“So … you’re not interested in being my dad anymore ’cause I’m not nice to your mistress?” I drop the fork on the table so it clangs *really* loudly.

“That’s not what I’m saying.” He crosses his arms against his chest. “You’re putting words in my mouth, and I don’t appreciate your attitude.”

“I don’t appreciate you cheating on my mom, but no one asked me how I felt about it.”

He clears his throat. This means he’s really mad. “Look—”

“How about I just spare both of us this torture and get out of here?” I pop up from my chair. He’s too polite and shy to make a scene. I hear him whisper my name hard.

I race out of the restaurant without my coat. A flurry of snowflakes float down from a deep dark sky. I let them fall on my cheeks and join the tears.

- - - Original Message - - -
Sent: Wednesday, January 12 11:13 AM
To: MADAME AMOUR
Subject: *Bad Breakup*

Dear Madame Amour,

I’m struggling. My boyfriend and I just broke up, and I want him back so badly that I’m willing to do just about anything. After football practice, I find myself driving over to his house, and sitting outside until he’s back from lacrosse. It’s only been a week. He seems to be completely over it. I saw him with another guy already. I mean, they could’ve been just talking, but he was doing the smiley laugh thing he does when he’s excited.

I don’t know what to do. We broke up after having a stupid argument. It felt so silly in the moment. I was jealous and just couldn’t hold it all in. Why do we get jealous? Why can’t I, like, be okay with him being friends with other guys?

What’s wrong with me?

Is there any way you think I can get him back? Any tips?

Sincerely,
Brokenhearted

- - - Original Message - - -
From: MADAME AMOUR
Sent: Thursday, January 14 9:07 PM
Subject: RE *Bad Breakup*

Dear Brokenhearted,

Sorry to hear about your breakup. They do suck. You're not alone in this feeling. But I'm about to drop some bad news … you showing up unannounced at his house most definitely won't get him back.

Step away and take a break. You never know if you'll get back together at some point in the future. But if you keep doing what you're doing, it could erase that potential outcome.

Jealousy is part of all of us.

But you have to control it.

Sincerely,
Madame Amour

* * *

All the lights are out when I get home, but the TV glows in the dark. I ease through the front door in case Mom is asleep.

"I'm here," she says. Her voice holds a slur.

"What are you doing still up?" I survey the scene in the living room. Empty tissue boxes. Two bottles of wine. Popcorn.

"Watched a movie, and fell asleep." She yawns. "And too much wine. How was dinner with your father?" She doesn't call him my dad anymore. I guess it's too sweet of a name. He's lost that title now.

"Fine."

"I thought you were spending the night at his house." Her eyes are all droopy and glossy.

"Yeah, nope. Not when *that* woman is over there."

She sighs deeply. "He's your father. You should spend time with him."

"He should've thought about that before—"

She waves her hand in the air. "I don't want to talk about it." Her eyes volley open and closed. "I want you to still love him."

"I can't." I start to sweat, and a sharp pain radiates through my gut. Hot, piercing, ever present.

"You can. For the first fifteen years of your life he was perfect. A great dad to you, and none of that has changed."

"But a shitty husband to you."

“That may be true, but that’s between him and me.”

“He shouldn’t have broken up our family.” Tears threaten to fill my eyes. I take a deep breath and push them away. With tears comes cramping.

“I agree with you, kiddo. But we’ve got to move forward. Don’t let this scar you.”

“How can it not?”

“I’ll be okay without your father.” She resumes her position on the couch and stares glassy-eyed at the television. “I’ll find love again one of these days. Plus, I have you. I got the best of him.” She drifts off, and tiny snores fill the room.

A knot forms in my chest.

I don’t think I ever want to be in love.

- - - Original Message - - -
Sent: Friday, January 15 11:13 AM
To: MADAME AMOUR
Subject: *Weenie*

Dear Madame Amour,

I have a crush on this boy in my geometry class. He sits beside me, and sometimes we’re paired for group work. He laughs at my bad jokes and even smiles at me. But I can’t figure out if he’s just being nice to me. Or if he likes me.

I don’t like gender roles and my parents don’t either. Like my dad totally stays home and my mom is the one who works. But I can’t stop thinking that he needs to ask me out since I’m the girl and he’s the boy. Ugh. Just typing that out looks horrifying.

People should ask other people out. Right?

I don’t have the chutzpah, as my bubbe would say.

I’ve dropped so many hints that I like him—lots of laughing and playfully touching and even asking him what he does after school and on weekends.

Should I just ask him out? Would that be weird?

What if he says no?

Best,
Weenie

- - - Original Message - - -
From: MADAME AMOUR
Sent: Friday, January 15 2:26 PM
Subject: RE *Weenie*

Dear Weenie,

I’m too scared to do a lot of things. Other people giving you advice would probably say some combination of the following:

“Go for it!”
“Put yourself out there.”
“You’ll never know unless you try.”

Heard variations of those?

Yeah, I don’t buy it. Putting yourself out there without concrete proof can—and most likely will—get you burned. Like third-degree ones on your soul. The odds are never really in your favor. Remember *The Hunger Games*? You don’t want any part of that. Not in high school.

I believe that if you’re afraid, then you aren’t ready.

That’s not what you wanted to hear. I’m certain of it. But there it is. That’s what I’m going to tell you. The truth as I see it. No sugar to coat it.

Do a little research as you figure things out, then maybe the gamble will pay off.

Best,
Madame Amour (also a bit of a weenie)

* * *

Indie won’t stop yakking the whole way to the movie theater. She’s sprayed herself in so much perfume, I have to crack the window to get some air. She keeps flipping down my car’s vanity mirror to check her latest shade of lipstick. “I’m not so sure about this color.”

“You’ve changed it three times already,” I say.

“Look.” She turns to me.

“I’m driving, remember? Also, it’s just a movie. And one I don’t even want to see,” I say, making a left turn at the light.

“You promised you’d be nice.”

I sigh. My hands grip the wheel super tight. I try to remain calm. If I’m calm, then my stomach won’t cramp. “Can you get my pills from the front pocket of my backpack?”

She reaches behind my seat. “Didn’t you already take one?”

“What are you—the pill police reporting for duty?”

“No, just—”

“It’s not working, so sometimes I have to double up.”

“Okay. I was worried. Like it’s a movie. So simple.”

“Nothing is just that simple. You know that.”

“Okay,” she says.

“I’m fine. It’s okay.”

But it’s not okay. I’ve been a mess all day preparing to go on this double date with her. I was back and forth to the bathroom, and not because of outfit changes or makeup experimentation.

“Thanks again for doing this.”

“Yeah, yeah,” I say, and she smiles.

I turn into the mall parking lot. The movie theater sign leaves a rainbow of colored light all over the black pavement. I find a decent parking spot near the doors. Indie is bubbling over with chatter and excitement like a bottle of fizzy water that’s been shaken up.

I wrap my scarf tighter around my neck until it’s too snug. Just how this whole thing feels.

“They’re in the lobby. I can see them,” Indie whispers as we approach.

There’s no turning back now.

Nikhil towers over Marcus. Marcus has always been the shortest person in our class. They’re a similar shade of warm chestnut brown. Nikhil fusses with his wavy black hair, then drops down to one knee to tie his shoe. Marcus shifts his weight from left to right and obsessively pushes his thick glasses up and down his thick nose like he’s always done when nervous.

If we ever had children—like when pigs fly and hell freezes over and Pluto becomes a planet again—they’d be born with glasses.

Indie almost breaks into a run once we get inside. I trail behind her like my legs are made of lead. She basically jumps into Nikhil’s arms and gives him the biggest hug I’ve ever seen. Her face lights up, and her dimples show, which is her deepest and most sincere smile.

I find a spot on the floor to stare at.

“Hey,” Marcus says to me.

“Hey,” I reply back.

“Hi, Nora,” Nikhil says.

“Yeah,” I reply.

We stand there, the awkwardness building like the bad music in a horror film before someone dies. I start to sweat. I take a deep breath and wait for the soft tingle I usually feel when my medicine kicks in. But I don’t feel it. Only the hot cramps kneading and churning in my stomach.

I look for the nearest bathroom.

“I already got the tickets,” Nikhil says, flashing the paper at us. “This theater lets you pick the seats ahead of time, so I got ones right in the middle

for all of us.”

I shoot Indie an angry glare. Her eyes grow large and fill with guilt.

“Is something wrong?” Nikhil asks her.

Indie answers carefully. “That’s … great. Right, Nora?”

“Yeah, whatever.” My cheeks flush as I take one of the tickets Nikhil hands out. He shoves Marcus in the shoulder.

“So, how’s your day been?” Marcus asks like he’s my dad.

“Fine,” I say, putting major space between us.

“Are you excited for this movie? I’ve heard good things.”

“Yep.”

“Want some snacks?”

“Nope.” *Greasy popcorn will trigger the episode I’m on the edge of.*

“My treat.” He smiles. Mom thinks he looks cute when he smiles, because he’s not doing the sulky thing his face usually does.

“Nope, again.”

His smile fades.

We shuffle into theater number four with the rest of the crowd. It’s packed. Even if I wanted to switch seats, I couldn’t.

Indie watches me as we file into our row. She’s staring so hard, trying to get me to look at her. I don’t. She owes me even bigger for this. I try to keep my face blank. I try to be a good friend and make sure she has a good time. I want her to have this. I want her to be happy.

Marcus plops down to my right and Indie to my left.

“The previews are my favorite part,” Marcus says.

Mine, too.

My stomach cramps up and begins to bloat. I press my hand to it, willing it to stop.

Indie stares at me. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Why does everyone keep asking me that?” I snap.

They all turn back to face a darkening screen. The previews start. The cramping crescendos as everyone laughs. Sweat beads across my forehead. I look left and then right, counting the number of people I would need to scoot past to get to the bathroom in time.

I take a deep breath and stand. “Be right back.”

I go right. Four chairs.

One

…

Two

…

Three

…

Four.

I try not to run. I try not to signal to anyone that something is wrong. It will all be fine as soon as I get to the bathroom.

I burst out of the theater and slip into the empty ladies' room. The scent of antiseptic wraps around me, bringing a familiar sense of safety.

I don't even have time to line the toilet with paper before my stomach betrays me. I hope no one comes in here, and that thought makes my stomach churn even harder.

My legs shake. And the tears come. Ugh. I hate the tears. Once the faucet opens, I can't control them even if I wanted to. My body does what it wants to do no matter what. I can't trust it.

The thought that has haunted me since I started high school, the thought that whispers to me whenever I have an episode, the thought that feels truer than anything else in my life blares inside me: *No one will ever want to go on dates with me when I always have to use the bathroom.*

I shake my head and bury the thought deep inside. I swallow another one of my pills dry and wait for the tingle to wash over me like rain. My stomach cramps lessen, the tears dry up, and the urge to use the bathroom slowly subsides.

I wash my hands, then my face, trying to erase signs of tears. I look at my phone and realize I've been in the bathroom for almost a half hour. I've missed the rest of the previews and the start of the movie. I don't know if I should even go back in there. I take one more look at myself, then leave the bathroom.

I startle backward. Marcus stands there waiting.

"What are you doing?" I say.

He hands me a cup. "Ginger ale. For your stomach."

My skin warms.

"I remember your mom would pack it in your lunch. You were the only kid who got to have soda in elementary school. I was so jealous."

He knows. Does everyone know?

I want to say something mean to him, but more tears brim in my eyes. "Yeah, I've got a thing … like some stomach…"

"I got them to change our seats, so you, like, could be near the theater door in case you need to go back to the bathroom." He holds up two new tickets.

I should say thank you, but the words feel buried deep inside.

I stare at the exit doors. If I run out and go home, Nikhil will have to take Indie home and she'll be grounded. If I stay, then I can't be mean to Marcus, because he's actually done something nice. But he knows about my irritable bowel disorder, and I don't know how I feel about that. The anxiety of it makes my heart race and sweat slip down my back.

"We'll be breaking up the double-date situation by sitting away from Nikhil and Indie, but I think it'll be okay."

"I don't date," I say to him.

"Okay," he replies.

"Well, not right now."

He nods and hides a sheepish smile. I take a deep breath and follow him back into the dark theater. I feel my stomach start to settle.

- - - Original Message - - -
Sent: Saturday, January 16 11:13 PM
To: MADAME AMOUR
Subject: *Seeking Love*

Dear Madame Amour,

I'm the only person in my friend group that's never been kissed.

That's weird, right?

But I don't know what to do about it. I've been changing up my look and going to every party and trying to be more social.

I went to a fortune-teller and she said that she didn't see it in the cards for me right now. Is something wrong with me? What should I do?

Sincerely,
Seeking Love

- - - Original Message - - -
From: MADAME AMOUR
Sent: Sunday, January 17 10:45 PM
Subject: RE *Seeking Love*

Dear Seeking Love,

There's nothing wrong with you.

I repeat—NOTHING.

My Nana would say, "A watched pot will never boil," so just be yourself and see what happens.

To be honest, and I probably shouldn’t be this honest, so don’t tell anyone, but I’ve never dated. I know, I know—how ridiculous is it that I run a love advice column without having ever been in love?

But I choose to wait.

I suggest you don’t worry about it so much and see what happens. I think I’m going to do the same.

Best,
Nora James

A Play in Many Parts

FOX BENWELL

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

CHORUS	A company of teenage theater nerds—writers, actors, directors, costumiers, stagehands, and technicians. Players and narrators, both.
E/MARLOWE	Narrator. They/them. (Please.)
MRS. B	Adult supervisor/adviser to the company.
DESMON	Mrs. B's husband. Suave, successful stage actor and director. Sometimes. At others, he's a lost boy.
FAUSTUS	The everyman. Played by the chorus, each and every one, in turns.
MEPHISTOPHELES	Played here as the Spirit of Theater.
GOOD ANGEL	Played by Dad.

SETTING

Small, simple stage in a chair-filled hall. Audience is empty save for two people, front and center, watching events unfold upon the stage.

ACT I

CHORUS

(Dressed in the unofficial blank-slate theater uniform of black T-shirts and leggings. Barefoot, unadorned with jewelry or makeup. Step forward and speak in unison.)

If all the world's a stage, then all of life must be a script and every man the writer, and director, and the lead.
An arrogant view, perhaps. A view of kings, warlords, and lovers; a view of stars who strive to always take that extra bow or byline. Maybe.
Or perhaps it is a tale of fate and chances: who will rise, and who will fall.
Or one of your players running lines and possibilities until they get it right—as right as our frail human flesh allows, in whatsoever time we have.
Or perhaps it's all of this, or more, or none of it.
Let us explain, and pass the fate and judgment of this Faust into your hands.

ACT I, SCENE 1

E

(Enters hall, hovers by door.)

Somewhere in this room sit your Robin Hoods and Romeos. Your Captain Hooks and your Javerts.

Somewhere.

It seems unlikely, when you look at them.

(CHORUS mills about. Some sit on chairs in an approximate circle; some are clustered at edges of hall, quietly talking among themselves. Some fiddle with phones or leaf through notebooks. Everyone visibly waiting. Nerves are palpable.
Note: Individual characters are visible through costuming: the goths and gamers, hipster kids and beauty queens. But the slouching and averted gaze and checking of clocks are the same, mirrored from one another.)

E

(Inhales.)

It's intimidating, so much self-consciousness gathered in one room.

But it's deceiving, too.

You can be nervous *and* a cocky mother all at once. You can *love* a thing, and be wholly afraid of loving it.

That's theater. And everybody in this room is somebody who gets it.

Theoretically.

Of course, they could all be acid-breathing critics.

(Exhales.)

I stride just enough so that anyone who sees me in the corner of their eye will see *confident E*. The version of myself who'd walk across a stage. But nobody looks up, despite the too-loud wood-on-wood sound of my cane, and I find myself casting my thanks up into the highest corners of the room.

I pick a seat beside a red-haired, glasses-wearing boy who's scribbling in a fancy notebook. *Writer*, I think. *Hi, my people.*

But Mr. Writer does not hear my telepathic greeting, and he does not raise his head until the door swings open, somehow with more gravitas than when we—the teenage company—used it, and in walks Mrs. B, her owlish glasses juuuust peering above a tower of pristine scripts, a purse, a coffee cup, a devil plushie, plastic shackles, and a bag of toffees.

She glides across the room, somehow managing not to trip on her flowing skirt.

"Morning, company. How are we all? Excited?" A lesser mortal would lose stride at thirty teenagers and their blank stares, but Mrs. B is theater people, and she knows the folks she works with.

"Don't mind the shackles. Pay attention and we'll all get along fine."

Someone snickers.

Mrs. B deposits the tower and stands before us, steepling her hands with glee. "My, we all look *positively radiant* this morning. Come on, wake up, wake up. On your feet. I expect my company to show up ready to perform."

And I'd protest, but just like that, we *are* a company, everybody's hesitation sloughed away.

She makes us play the name game. Catch the devil, tell the company your name and your biggest can't-resist-it theater weakness.

It’s … not as horrible as I’ve imagined it will be. And at least she isn’t calling out our names.

“I’m … it’s E,” I say on my turn. Barely flinching. “But I’d rather it weren’t anything. Call me Hey You or whatever. And it’s they, them pronouns please.”

Not one person questions it, and in that moment I *love* theater people and their ever-changing roles.

“And my biggest theater weaknessb is … retellings, probably. Or that thing where something on the stage just *hits you*, and it means something completely individual to you, but it’s like they wrote it with your life in mind.”

COMPANY

(Members step forward one by one, to deliver a line.)
The rising of the curtain and the blinding lights.
Symbolic props: a suitcase that’s a suitcase but also a desk, a door, a ticking bomb.
Shakespeare!
Lin-Manuel Miranda!
The Peter Pan-ness of it, how everything onstage is always *young*.
Silks and satins: Theater is like dress-up but for grown-ups.

Mr. Writer, it turns out, is not a writer. Not if his fame-and-stardom answer is an indication. I’m not sure that *anybody* here shares my weakness for the words. And I guess that is okay; perhaps this last-chance production of mine will be my time to shine.

* * *

With introductions down, the company all take a knee.

Or chair, in my case. But the principle’s the same.

“All right. To business. We have six weeks, as a company, to pull off the best damned production that we can. By which I mean *you* have six weeks. In this hall, you are masters of your own fates, and I hope you recognize the seriousness that requires. I’m here, I’ll help, but *you’re* responsible for everything from how you want to tell the tale to casting choice to set design.

“You want the magic of the theater? This is it.”

She steps into the circle, passing scripts to players.

“*Faustus*?” Mr. Fame-and-Fortune quirks his head.

Mrs. B lights up. “This *play*, my dears. This play.”

“Isn’t it a bit…” Whoever started trails off into nothing.

“What?”

No answer.

“Heavy?” Mrs. B hazards a guess. “Classic? *Old?* Grown-up? Yes, it’s

been called all those things. Along with ‘darkly funny and intelligent,’ and more than once, ‘prime vulgarity’ and ‘schmaltz.’ This play is…” She sighs, and I swear she almost hugs the script. “And anyway, *Faustus* it is. You can walk if you don’t like it, or you can sign up for six weeks of experience beyond your comprehension. Sign up, and you’ll be among the lucky few to grapple with such things. You will be *company*.”

ACT I, SCENE 2

The rest of the morning is filled with a first, tentative read-through.

I *love* him. Marlowe, I mean. Every word of him.

I love the jabs and jibes, the way the whole thing feels like swordplay, but with words.

I love the drama and the fun and the hollow-but-relatable humanity of Faustus.

All of it.

And even though some of us are kind of stumbling across the words, I’m just leaning back and *listening*.

Until Mr. Fame-and-Fortune breaks mid sin parade. “It’s a bit … pretentious, isn’t it?”

I sit bolt upright, his words grating down my spine. “What is?”

“Us. All this fancy language and stuff, here in 2017.”

And I’m going to argue, but a voice behind me gets there first. “No.”

EDWIN

No. I think it’s quite delicious.
(Stands, one hand holding out his script in proclamation, the other on his well-toned gut. He reads:)
“I come of royal parentage! My grandfather was a Gammon of Bacon, my grandmother a Hogshead of Claret-wine. My godfathers were these—Peter Pickleherring, and Martin Martlemas-beef. O, but my godmother she was a jolly gentlewoman, and well beloved … Her name was Mistress Margery Marchbeer.”
I just. Taste that poetry.

COMPANY

(Awed silence.)

Mrs. B breaks the awed silence, clapping for attention. “All right, all right, that seems as good a place as any to break for lunch. Forty minutes, people. *Please* use the trash cans, don’t spill coffee or Marchbeer on the speakers, and do try not to bowl each other over with your obvious, rampant enthusiasm.”

* * *

“Hi!”

I turn, to find the Marchbeer guy behind me, hand outstretched. And I must look surprised because he takes a small step back and rolls up his

sleeves dramatically before he tries again. “No daggers.”

This time, I shake.

“I’m Edwin.”

“And I’m—”

“The player without a name.” He grins, and I find myself doing the same.

“So you like words?” I say. You like … words?

His grin gets wider. “I like *these ones*. I am, it must be said, less fond of other words.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Like *grub*, for instance. It just sounds so … grublike, y’know? Low and dirty.”

“Huh. It does. But there’s something to be said for words that do that, you know?”

“You’re right. It’s like … word alchemy or something. Conjuring a thing with nothing but your tongue.

“Grub. *Grub*. Can’t you just see it?”

I can. And suddenly my sandwiches don’t seem appealing. “Ew.”

We talk. And there is another kind of magic. The kind where you find you belong.

What *doesn’t* belong is my dad.

My *dad*. Peeking through the doorway like some kind of creep. What is he doing here? And then he’s coming in and striding over toward Mrs. B and pulling her aside—

“Excuse me.” I pull myself up and away from this smiling logophile.

“Dad!” He turns, and so do the three nearest girls, huddling over paper coffee cups.

I wince. My dad … does not belong here. Look at him. All business suit and barely loosened tie.

“E—”

I glower, stop him in his tracks before he gets his mouth around the name.

At least he has the decency to *look* awkward, rubbing at his neck the way he does when he feels bad. “Just introducing myself. Y’know. In case there are any problems.”

“Problems?” I am Wrath.

“If you’re tired, or the pain gets bad and you can’t manage.”

“Dad. We’re fine. No. Leave.” I grab his sleeve and pull him angrily toward the door.

“Your teacher has a right to know, pet.”

“Go home.”

“All right, all right.” He pulls himself free and smooths the wrinkles in his sleeve. “But we should talk about this. If you aren’t being honest with her, I’m … I just don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Go. Home.”

Jesus. I do not lean on my cane the whole way back to my chair. With my back turned, even if he hovers, Dad won’t see me wince. And I will not give him any ammunition.

“Parents.” Edwin greets me with a sympathetic smile.

“Indeed. I disdain to have them.”

ACT I, SCENE 3

(COMPANY stands together, in a circle. They appear engaged and excited, for this is where the magic will begin.)

CHORUS

(As one.)

Faustus is in his study, surrounded by books and treatises that he knows by heart, a thousand roles and lines already mastered. And it is good. It *is*, but where to go from here?

Tonight, we’re all finding our inner Faustus.

“Drop your scripts a moment. Close your eyes,” says Mrs. B. And everybody does.

There’s something about standing vulnerable like that, listening to people’s breaths so intensely and nervously that somehow you all start to breathe as one.

There’s something, too, in knowing that without your stick or sight to balance you, one jostle and you’ll fall.

“Imagine, if you will, that you *are* Faustus. Standing in a magic circle not unlike our own. You know your books—your scripts—but a play is more than script. There’s more. If you’re ready to leap for it. Today, I want you to access your emotions. Yours, not Marlowe’s. But if we’re doing that, I need to know we trust each other, and that everyone is safe.”

MRS. B

Faustus, do you trust your Mephistopheles enough to fall?

(Three pairs break out of the circle while the others watch. Each Mephistopheles offers his Faustus a hand, all courteous and charming. Dances round him, offering assurance, then takes his place behind Faustus. Faustus crosses his arms over his chest, ready to fall back into Meph’s arms. Or not.)

“Okay, Faustuses, you’re in your study. See it? Smell it? Books and wood and candle wax. There you are, teetering upon the edge of *everything*, leaning in, ready to attain enlightenment, and WHAM—” The whole room jumps. “This great big, ugly demon appears, towers over you, all yellow sharpened fangs and leather wings and glinting eyes.”

(Beat.)

"What goes through your mind? How does it feel? Are you scared? Excited? Arrogant? Everyone keep thinking. Hold *on* to that emotion, but I want you to open your eyes." She walks quietly among us and taps a tiny blond girl on the shoulder. "Emily. How do you feel?"

"Excited," she says softly.

"Excellent. Center stage, please."

Emily steps into the middle of the circle.

"When's the last time you were really, wildly excited? The most excited you have ever been?"

"Ummmm…"

"Don't tell us. But how does it feel? That adrenaline, that joy. Is it pulsing in your fingers, gathered in your gut? What does your body *do* when it's excited?"

Emily looks terrified.

"*Feel it.* Doesn't matter why you are excited, only that you are. Use your own excitement—for snow days or getting your braces off or bringing home a puppy—and bring it to the stage. Got it? Okay. The demon's in front of you. Go."

For a moment, Emily just stands there, and we watch her, frozen, and it's awful.

Then she grins. Giggles, bouncing on her tiptoes as she gazes up at an imaginary beast. "Ahahahahahaaaa, you're here! It worked! I can't believe it! Oh my GOD, I am a master! YOU'RE a … look at you!" She reaches up, pulls at his imaginary wings and spins him round, bouncing again for good measure. "A marvel!"

Everyone applauds. We run angry Faustus, *so* angry he almost breaks his fist against the stage. And one cowering doctor so afraid that he cries actual tears.

I try *arrogant*. Feel the pull of confidence inside my chest, a swagger that tugs harshly on my hips—and no, I will not tone it down—and juuust a hint of nastiness upon my tongue.

It's … not the same walk that gets me across a room of stares, but it is close. Perhaps a distant cousin.

"So which is it?" someone asks, as we cool off. "Scared or arrogant or…?"

"That, my dear, is for the company to figure out. Who's *your* Faustus? What are his motivations? All part of the challenge."

"He *does it*, though. He summons them and signs the contract, and he won't repent. He can't be that scared," Emily quips.

“You’ve never kept going when you’re too afraid to quit?” asks Mrs. B with … what? Is that sadness? Disbelief?

“No!”

“Well, I’m glad.”

“This whole thing’s a bit weird, though, isn’t it? That he would sell his soul.” A long-haired, Zelda-shirted boy frowns.

“Ah, but mortals have their limits. And in Marlowe’s day we didn’t have those Brendan Fraser movies about dealings with the devil. This was new.”

“Yeah, but … Mephistopheles is supposed to be *scary*, right? Isn’t that a clue? Like … run, mister, you’re asking for trouble.”

Mrs. B nods. “And yet his desires to improve and learn, and put good into the world, were so great that that somehow mattered more.”

He wrinkles up his nose in disbelief.

I think I get it, though.

“So!” Mrs. B continues. “We have a few more sessions like today for getting down and dirty with the details, but now that we sort of know the play, while we work, I’d like you all to think about *your* version. How you understand it, how you want to stage it, and the roles you’d like to play.”

Excitement zings around the room.

“I suggest you divvy up the tasks. Play to your strengths. But I should warn you, first, that this show is a democracy, and, second, I expect all jobs to be attended to; if you see something lacking, it is *company* responsibility to fix it.

“I’ve got sign-up sheets for areas you might want to consider: acting parts and staging, costumes, lighting and tech, and writer-directorial. Have a look. Volunteer for everything you have some skill or interest in, and then pick one more to offer your hands as a runner and a lackey.” And her face lights up. “Let’s see what this company is made of.”

* * *

Nearly everyone puts down their name for everything, with an occasional *I can’t sew to save my life, but* and *Clearly you need somebody with* confidence *to take the stage*.

Mostly, though, this company wants to make art, at every level. And it isn’t often that you’re trusted with the workings of it instead of mere lines.

I am the first name under WRITER, closely followed by Edwin, in his pretty cursive.

And I hesitate at more, replaying my dad’s imposition, and the worry lines

around his eyes. Replaying, honestly, the weeks and months of pain and sleep and pain again that got us there.

But we are company, and this is theater, and magic does not make itself.

In the end, I *also* put my name down under acting and in tech. I promise I'll let someone else run things, but if they're short, I know my way around a switchboard.

That's it.

Three things.

It's perfectly reasonable.

ACT I, SCENE 4

(A supermarket, post rehearsal. E walks slowly. They look tired.)

I see them in the supermarket, on the way home, holding hands. And she looks different. Mrs. B. Softer. Sadder. An actor with her makeup off.

I hang back by the oranges and listen while they browse the leafy greens.

"What time is it?" he asks.

"Seven," she says. "Nearly. Let's get dinner, and we'll go home for the news."

He nods, and, having selected a bag of something deep dark green and healthy, she pulls gently on his arm and they walk on.

(E follows.)

"What time is it?" he asks, in the next aisle.

"Seven. Nearly. Let's get dinner, and we'll go home for the news."

That's odd.

Again, by the biscuits. "What time is it?" This time, she leans in, squeezes his hand, and whispers, almost playful. "Seven. Nearly." And he almost smiles.

I break away and head toward the pizza—Friday's post-rehearsal meal of choice. But I can't stop hearing their two voices, seeing Mrs. B so *bare*, and it feels wrong all of a sudden. Knowing what I know and not confessing.

I find them by the checkout.

"Hi!" I say too brightly as I join them in the queue. "Mrs. B!"

She startles for the briefest moment and then breaks into that teacher voice, full of interest and pride. "E! Fancy seeing you!" She turns to her … whoever he is. "E's a Marlowe on our *Faustus* project."

Oh gosh. I feel *seen*.

"And this"—she leans in again—"is my husband, the great Desmond—"

"Marlowe?" he interrupts, staring at me, wide eyed. "Kit? I knew him once." And his grip on Mrs. B tightens a notch.

I freeze, just for a second and not really knowing why, and I instantly feel

bad for it. But Mrs. B is cool; she has it all under control. “Really, truly great.” She steers. “He puts up with all our late rehearsals and my faffiness.”

Common ground. “That’s … yeah. Dad’s always telling me that theater will be the death of me *and everybody else* with all the late meals and the fees and taxiing me to and fro.”

“‘Love is merely a madness,’” she says.

“I guess so.”

“I *do* love you,” Desmond says, a little loudly.

“Indubitably.”

They lean into each other like those penguins on the telly, keeping out the cold and nosy teenagers alike. It’s nice. And kind of gross. And nice again.

I pull out my phone and frown at it, the only I’m-not-watching-you I have to offer. “Anyway.” I talk down at the screen. “I just … I saw you and—” And what?

“I’m glad you said hello.”

“Me too. See you on Wednesday?”

“Indubitably!” Mrs. B winks, and they turn back to the front of the line.

And when they’ve packed their healthy food into a bag and start to leave, I hear him ask, “What time is it?”

ACT II, SCENE 1

After dinner I sit back against my pillows, and I slowly, consciously release my muscles each in turn and breathe. My whole body hums with the held-in effort of the day, every movement stored up, waiting until I have time to feel it.

I mean, obviously I feel it at the time, but something of it is delayed.

I’m *tired*.

Some of it is good tired. The tired that you get with honest work and revelations.

Some of it …

For all I stride across a hall, my body has to work to keep itself upright.

Dad would call it my Sisyphus toll. Push a boulder up a hill, pretending it’s okay, and come nightfall it—and I—come crashing down.

But he forgets the view each time I make it to the top.

We have contracts: I, the undersigned, commit to six weeks of rehearsals and all sundry for the Company production of *Faustus* (play may be retitled as the writing team see fit). I will not miss sessions without fair reason and notice, and I will behave and perform to a professional standard at all times, pertaining to a decent work ethic and mutual respect for other members of the

company.

It’s fair, but somehow a contract makes it all grown-up and binding, Sisyphus or no.

My doctor would be furious. She’d bid me lay this script aside, lest it tempt my soul and rack my body with this pain more and forever.

Actually, she wouldn’t waste the drama. She *would* tell me to try nothing. Literally. Building up from nothing to five minutes of something, maybe, over the next weeks or months, if my body can handle it.

If …

Pacing, she would call it. I call it stagnation, and I am not ready not to see the view.

Like I said, I understand why Faustus won’t repent.

And while I only have this gnarly, chewed-up pen, I feel his resolve in the drag of wrist and arm as thoroughly as though I sign with blood.

Consummatum est; this bill is ended,
And E hath bequeath’d their soul to Company.

ACT II, SCENE 2

CHORUS

(Dressed as Faustuses Past.)
What’ve you got there? A book? You can barely read a word of it.

“It’s like … gross, isn’t it? Grotesque. That’s the point of the whole thing. The gluttony and pride and everything,” argues coffee-cup girl number one as we all sit, reading through and trying to find our own style.

“Not really.” I sigh. “Not in a turns-your-stomach sense, at least. It’s meant to be enticing so that we might see how we could fall.”

“I don’t think that’s right. Because firstly, Faustus has already fallen, right? So what he values lies somewhere between *extra* and *wrong*. And second, it’s a warning: If I saw those worst-of-the-worst demons ruckusing, I’d run.”

“They’re not—”

“They’re *freaks*, E.”

I bristle. “You *do* know where that comes from, right?”

“Yeah, like … freaks and stuff. All two-heads and transvestites and men like elephants. Like—”

“Creatures from hell?” I lean forward in my chair, cane in my hands.

Waiting for the penny drop.

She doesn’t get it. Doesn’t move.

I push it. “We’re not. Staging. A freak show.”

“Did you know that the word *freak*—” Edwin starts.

“I’m not done.” And I stand, leaning on my cane more than I need, because she *will* see it, even if I have to walk over and crush her toes. “We’re not staging a freak show because we’re not perpetuating the idea—in any way—that sin and disability go hand in hand. That we’re depraved or lesser or broken. I won’t. And we’re *not* having people pay for tickets to see me as entertainment.”

The whole company is staring.

“Except in the *theater* sense. That’s fine.”

(Beat.)

“I’m going for some air.”

* * *

“The word *freak*”—Edwin sidles up to me at break—“or *freke*, *freca*, *frech*, variously, once meant ‘brave, bold warrior.’” He grins shyly. “The only meaning I’ll ever condone.”

I think I’m actually blushing. Then he adds, so quiet I can barely hear it, “Freak,” and I definitely am.

ACT II, SCENE 3

I’m *exhausted*.

Every time I think I’ve reached the depths of it, I seem to sink again. And it’s ridiculous. It’s not as though I’ve *actually* climbed Sisyphus’s mountain.

Anyway. There’s homework. Mrs. B came in after my outburst and observed us tiptoeing around the script. There’s *so much* to consider in the staging of a play, every choice rolling against another. It’s kind of like an avalanche, and none of us have shovels.

“My dears, this company is lost. But lost is good! It lets you stumble across countries. Tonight, I want you to go home and research works that *Faustus* has inspired, on the stage and off it. Lose yourselves to possibility.

“Become cartographers, and when I see you Friday, bring a map.”

I get lost in Berlioz’s opera, just a concert hall performance, first, with a full company of singers and orchestra. We could never do that, but the connection between the conductor and his players reminds me of Edwin and his words, and I can’t stop watching his expression.

I think I just became an opera fan.

And there’s *more*. I find *nineteen* different operatic adaptations. Lavishly staged, full of overzealous acting and dramatic staging and costumes to match.

Glass-wall prisons, scaffold cages.

Rich, sumptuous dresses.

Romantic.

Horrifying.

Every version of *Faustus* that you could picture, here it is.

I consciously switch to something we could do: pure acting. Scroll through high school productions and interviews with the Royal Shakespeare Company.

And then, is that—?

It can’t be.

Desmond Battle, 1991, the Globe’s answer to the modern age.

This Desmond looks directly at the camera, all smirk and crisp white beard and solemn eyes, but if you turn your head a little and you squint, or you imagine this guy haunted by a thousand Lucifers, it might be him.

It might. And I might die of curiosity.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

(Steps forward.)
They did this really cool thing, where two players rehearsed Meph and Faustus. And they learned together, you know, so they sort of mimicked each other and formed the two between them, but then … on the night, they don’t know who is who. It’s literally down to fate
(CHORUS MEMBER 2 joins them. Both have giant matches, which they strike.)
and it’s like E said: Either one of them could fall.
(Whosoever’s match burns out first bows; the other steps back into the chorus line.)

CHORUS MEMBER 3

What if we gender swapped? I’m Faust material as much as anyone.
(Pause.)
Or cast the black guy in the lead?

CHORUS MEMBER 4

There was this show where everything was black and white, one spotlight. And a series of a hundred paintings inspired by the tale.

CHORUS: COFFEE-CUP GIRLS

We want *beaten silks and feathered caps and grandeur*.

CHORUS: TECH GUYS

Picture this: a bunch of high school kids like us, in an amphitheater. Their set is just a scaffold tower on wheels, but somehow you could see the depths of hell inside it.
And the best part?
While they were performing …
(Push big, obvious button. Thunder crashes; lightning forks down to the stage.)

CHORUS

Marlowe himself even wrote it twice.
And you know the weird thing? All these versions: They’re ALL *Faustus*. Recognizably, for all their differences.

ACT III, SCENE 1

Time moves, and with it, the players.

The wardrobe team takes patient measurements from neck to toe, sketches

out ideas, and debates fabrics with all the passion of nations at war. And they have questions: When's it set? How are we playing this?

The tech trio—young and keen and recognizable by cargo pants and gaming tees—learns how to raise and dim the lights, change filters, and manipulate the way sound bounces round the room. But we need a vision to mark up with cues, or else it's speculation.

I lean back against the wall and close my eyes, will myself away, into my pajamas.

"It's not *that* bad." Edwin's voice hovers by my shoulder.

"It's not that," I say, although it really is. "I'm just…" *Tired.* And my spine is going to explode with all the shock factor of Mephistopheles's first entrance. "Headache."

"Ah, yeah. Got some ibuprofen if you want 'em."

I turn to meet his gaze and grimace, thinking of the medication rattling around inside me. "No thanks."

What I want is to go back on my word, go home and crawl into bed.

Or not. What I want is to skip right to the end, to get that curtain call without having to do this part.

I'd sell my body *and* my soul for that.

ACT III, SCENE 2

We try *Faustus* as interpretive mime, but it's ridiculous, and every player falls about the stage, confused.

We try Brecht, all cleverness and slapstick and breaking the fourth wall.

We wonder whether we could reverse the whole thing, have Faustus a lowly demon, aspiring to greater things but *never good enough* unless the angel-company continually bolster and remind him. And it sounds cool, but it misses all the nuance, and we only have three days before our script is out of time.

Three days.

Two.

We consider something familiar, set in the halls of high school, as nerdy Faustus longs for better grades and fewer bullies. And it works. It shows we understand the bargains being made.

And in the background hovers Mrs. B. And at night she goes home to her Faustus, with all his forgetting, and I wonder whether he'll be there on the first night, and whether it will be his last.

I want to ask her what he would prefer. What he was like onstage. But I saw the startle in her eyes the night we met, the sadness in his, and I cannot

bring that to the room.

But it's not good enough, this rough approximation.

The Globe's answer deserves worthy conjurations.

And, honestly, if this *is* to be my last play before I stop pushing up the hill, I feel like I deserve them, too.

ACT III, SCENE 3

I can't stop thinking about it, and I have to ask. "Mrs. B?" I step in line beside her in the carpark and relieve her of a box of scrolls and hats and goblets.

"Oh, my very own Marlowe! Good evening, sir."

Pride—just for a second—blossoms alongside my nerves.

This is right to ask, isn't it?

Worth it?

"There's … a thing I found online. A newspaper review."

"Mm-hmm."

"With … a Desmond Battle in the lead."

She sighs. A tiny sigh.

"It's him, isn't it?"

"Yes." And she looks so small and so lost that—maybe I should have left it alone.

"I'm sorry." But I'm in it now, so: "Does he miss it?"

She nods. "On his good days, all he talks about is marking up a script and pulling in reviews, how he'll do it all again with the next run."

And I see it: what she'd give for him to have that one last run.

Faustus.

Our Faustus.

Mine, and his and hers.

And hers. It's been right in front of us, all the way along.

ACT IV, SCENE 1

"It's a lot of work, I know, but look—I think I found it."

The company stares blankly over their scripts.

"Faustus!" I exclaim.

More stares.

"Look, do you relate to Marlowe's play?"

Someone shrugs.

"Because I do. And I kept shoving that down, but we should use it."

Edwin frowns. "Look, E, it's been a long couple of weeks, and you look *tired*."

Why does everyone keep saying that?! “I’m not! I mean, I am, but … look. We’re *better* than that bully line. All of us. We’re a company of stage folks. We are *literally* Faustus.”

“I’m … not sure I follow.”

“We all signed the contract, right? We *want something* from this.”

They’re looking at me like I sprouted demons from my tongue. I breathe, and start again.

ACT IV, SCENE 2

We stayed late, all of us, until the caretaker stood over our circle, rattling his keys.

Together, we wrote our story, though we didn’t change a thing.

E

(Steps forward.)
I found my name, within this finest company.
It’s Marlowe. I will write this story twice, and twice again until it’s right.
For it’s important.

ACT IV, SCENE 3

CHORUS

Faustus is in his study, surrounded by books and treatises that he knows by heart, a thousand roles and lines already mastered. And it is good. It *is*, but where to go from here? What role do you give to Romeo and Robin Hood when they have directed companies?

FAUSTUS

Oh, what applause that was. What rush! None could expect magics such as that onstage … and yet …
(Casts gaze across the study, gestures.)
This stage is empty of applause. ’Tis not enough.

Our Faustus summons not an ugly demon, but a *presence*, all charm and flamboyance—the Spirit of Theater, ready to ensnare you with his wonders. This Mephistopheles has *knowledge* of the stage. Experience. And he has a crisp white beard, of course.

Our Faustus-chorus asks him questions of success and staging. But the charming theater man answers in riddles and remembrances: of earnest Faust and his trapezing, cannonballing alternate, of intimate performance, of starred reviews and wild standing ovations. The chorus is enraptured.

We write Desmond-proper into it, as well. And nervous Jenny, whom you won’t have seen at all until this moment in the play, because she hid her face behind a script or prop or person, and she never said a word although she *desperately* wanted confidence: That was her deal. And me. Sort of. The Marlowe who just wanted one more run (and then another), who would bargain with the universe to get it. All of us are here.

ACT IV, SCENE 4

I dump my bag beside the door and arch my back and shoulders, but all stretching does tonight is remind me exactly where the muscles lie.

Dad emerges from the kitchen, amiably brandishing a chopping knife. “You’re late. And you look tired.”

“I’m fine,” I say, concentrating on not rubbing at my lower back in front of him.

He frowns. “I’m not sure this play thing is a good idea, love.”

“Dad!”

“I know, I know, but we had a deal, and if you’re coming home like this … You know, nobody would think anything less of you for dropping out.”

“I signed a contract. And I said I’m fine.”

How does he know?

What does he know? I’m fine. Really.

But I’m pulling pain meds from my jeans before my door is even closed. Telling myself it’s been a long day and anybody would be tired. That *everybody’s* muscles ache like this, and all I need is to lie down for five minutes.

Or ten.

Everything is buzzing heavy with the efforts of the day. Sometimes when it’s like this, I feel like I’m an old appliance, and I wonder how long it’ll be before they throw me out.

Sometimes.

But tonight it is well used.

The body doth protest, though, clenching in on itself, gaining about fifty thousand pounds, and even though I’m sure there is a feast downstairs, I’m just … I’m just going to lie here for a minute.

A minute, and a minute more, and then I’m gone, dragged into the cursèd sleep of princesses and the chronically ill.

ACT IV, SCENE 5

CHORUS

(Dressed in blank-slate theater uniform of black T-shirts and leggings. Barefoot, unadorned.)

MARLOWE

(Center stage, to audience.)

The first time that I stood upon a stage, I froze. Hot lights melting off my face, tears like razors in my throat. I *hated* it. But in the safe and dark of the drive home, I could not stop retelling everything, the story of the birth of Jesus, punctuated with the stage directions and the details of my fellow actors’ lives. How, really, Emily was far too brash to be a sheep, and Joseph would grow up to carry Jesus because he did much, much better groaning noises.

By the time we pulled into the drive, I had elaborated, and the whole nativity was staged upon the moon, where it always looked like snow, because Christmas

wasn’t Christmas without snowmen.
In my terror, I’d soaked up the magic, and I *loved* it. And I wasn’t letting go.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

(Steps forward, takes Marlowe’s hand as they speak to audience.)
Sitting in that big red velvet seat, my feet barely dangling off it, all warm and glowy in my bestest Christmas dress, I remember Peter flying—really flying—right out off the stage above my head. And I thought, *I can do that. I can fly!*

CHORUS MEMBER 2

(Dressed in Elizabethan costume. Steps forward, full of bravado.)
I bite my thumb at you, sir!
(Draws sword, parries back and forth across the stage.)
I bite my thumb.
(Steps back, takes Marlowe’s other hand.)

CHORUS MEMBER 3

(In tech-crew combats. Steps forward flamboyantly, gleans applause from audience.)
You can hear the gasp whenever you raise up the lights. The pause as it ends. That’s you. It’s like …
(Claps toward audience until they join, raises hands to increase applause, lowers to decrease.)
THAT. Back there, you are the puppet master.
(Steps back, takes place in chorus line)

MEPHISTOPHELES

(Now fashioned with a crisp white beard and dapper suit, as like Desmond as the crew could manage. Same player takes some of Faustus’s lines.)
These wonders of the stage could all be yours, if only you will sign.

ACT V, SCENE 1

CHORUS

Theater isn’t always easy magic. I suppose that if it were, no deals would e’er be made.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Let’s try something new!
(CHORUS, dressed in abstract costume, moves into a series of tableaux to mimic Kanso’s tortured oil paintings as they tell the tale.)

CHORUS MEMBER 2

We want stark. Traditional. Let Marlowe’s words reach ears on their own merit.

CHORUS MEMBER 1

(Sneaks up behind them with a placard reading: BOO!)

CHORUS

(Repeat with more opposing views. What starts civilized becomes a skirmish. Props used as swords and grenades. Eventually, they stop and come together.)
This company is made of grit and steel. A thousand stories, told and still unfolding. You won’t see them all, but they’re in every choice we make.

ACT V, SCENE 2

Mrs. B froze when I asked her to bring Desmond to rehearsal. Barely, but enough that I’ll never forget.

“Why, dear?”

“It would—” *ruin the surprise*. My inner writer bristles, but a different tableau flashes through my mind, of an aged Lost Boy standing by the checkout with a Wendy he’s halfway forgotten, and of the way she holds on to

his hand. “—mean the world to us for him to see it.”

I explain. Staring mostly at the floor, because I cannot bear it if our play is misconstrued as something that could hurt.

And at first she’s not convinced, so I tell her how *different* our *Faustus* is, that Desmond is right at its core.

She sighs. “I just … I don’t want to push him.”

And I wish that I could tell her that sometimes, sometimes we *want* to push, because if we don’t, we’re stuck. I want to tell her that a Lost Boy needs to remember his happy thought if he’s going to fly. But words are harder when you do not have a script.

She sighs, sad and lost and hopeful all at once. “Let’s see how he is?”

I worried all night about whether he would come. But they’re here, the Lost Boy and Wendy holding on to everything together as the company takes to the stage.

CHORUS

At Vanholt’s court, our Faustus seeks to please his audience, offers them tricks and delights as sweet and rare as ripened grapes in January. We offer you familiar and strange. We offer you ourselves, as flawed and incomplete as they might be, as people and as players. Doth it enchant? Have we performed it well?
(Later.)

CHORUS

And soon it ends, and this chorus shall die. Let’s reminisce. Your favorite moments. Were they desperate times or triumphs? The theater?
(Mephistopheles steps forth and bows.)
Or the majesty?

CHORUS MEMBER 1

Or Peter Pan?

CHORUS MEMBER 3

(Steps forward, directs audience in rising and falling applause.)
The rising of the lights!

CHORUS MEMBER 6

(Gleeful.)
Oh, I don’t know. I’m rather looking forward to the part where Faust comes to a sticky end.

CHORUS

Or maybe it’s this. Standing here with you. And the promise that tomorrow is another night; we’ll tell the tale again. And when the run is through, we’ll carry it along to the next show, until our tapestry of plays becomes so rich and warm and glimmering it even beats his velvet.
It’s knowing that you’ll take us with you, too.
It’s the Spirit of the Theater rising up through broken memory because the pieces remain strong. It’s knowing that the company prevails: Prometheus can take the ring to Mordor; boys fly; devils and angels play in the same sandbox with discordant harmony—neither winning because then the game would end.
It’s all of this.
It’s knowing that you’ll sign a thousand deals to get it all again. Sweet theater, save us from ourselves with a curtain’s rising kiss.

EPILOGUE

The bell tolls midnight, and our script comes to an end. We freeze. Chorus and our audience of two caught in a moment bigger than any of us. And this, my friends, is where our *Faustus* becomes something else. Not tragedy but triumph.

Sure, there's work to do. There always is. Greasepaint and silks to apply and oh so many nuances to tweak, but we've made magic. Oh, sweet theater. And standing in this moment, my knees shaking with the effort and emotion, I'm okay, even if this is my last.

Ballad of Weary Daughters

KRISTINE WYLLYS

EARLY SUNLIGHT, WEAK and pale, spilled through the small kitchen window, bathing Mama in shimmering gold. Dust motes danced around her in lazy circles, twirling higher before floating downward to settle back on the faded linoleum floor.

I blinked, and for a second, the barest of beats, I saw Mama as she used to be, not so very long ago. When Daddy was still here and she was the one dancing, flowing skirt twirling, our laughter the melody she moved to.

My hand slipped, spoon scraping against the side of the bowl, and it was a thunderclap in the too-quiet space. The kitchen felt haunted without Daddy holding court at the table next to me, Bible spread open, morning devotionals handed out to each of us depending on what the day's agenda was. Quiet and the kitchen had never coexisted before. Now it was full of it in all the ways it wasn't full of Daddy.

Mama's eyes slipped closed and I held my breath as her lips moved, silently asking for strength and blessings in a language I hadn't had a chance to learn. Even this was new and wrong. Daddy had always led the morning prayers in his booming, pulpit voice, Mama only chiming in with an "Amen" at the very end. That had been the way of us. The good preacher and his family, always conscious of who we were supposed to be and who could be watching, ready to judge the slightest misstep.

I didn't exhale until she shook her head and cleared her throat.

"Riv—" She paused with a frown and tried again. "Tabitha! You're going to be late for the bus!"

She was always doing that, mixing up our names, for as long as we had names to mix up. But what was once a family joke now seemed to have grown thorns for her. As if it were yet another reminder of just how exhausted she always was now. How we couldn't win for losing.

"River." She said it firmly, as if my name were both the reminder of grace

and promise of strength her Tsalagi grandmother, my elisi, had intended it to be when she picked it.

I made a noise and met her eyes, brown like my own, but deeper and richer.

Remorse swam in them. What soggy, generic cereal I'd managed to choke down turned to lead in my gut.

"The littles have a doctor's appointment today," she said, and looked down at the soapy water their bowls were in.

"What time?" My voice came out clumsy from lack of use.

"Four."

I nodded. "I'll have them there."

Relief was a drug, and it coursed through her, softening her features and making her shoulders sag.

They stiffened again a moment later. The high never lasted too long.

"Sharon needs someone to cover her shift this weekend. It'd put me into overtime, but I think I could get it approved." She was asking for permission. It wasn't framed that way—it never was—but Mama was standing there, in her faded hot-pink scrubs that made her brown skin look impossibly browner, asking her seventeen-year-old daughter for permission.

"You should do it," I said. I put my spoon down and stood, picking up the bowl of half-eaten mess that claimed to be as good as Cheerios and depositing it in the sink.

"I'm gonna head out," I said, and pecked her cheek, remembering at the last second to do it lightly so as not to smear her carefully applied contour.

"Be good." It was a whisper. Both a demand and a plea. It was a normal gesture, the old normal, and we were clinging to what was left of it.

I nodded. Heaved my book bag up on my shoulder. Took a step toward the door.

"Love you," I told her.

She smiled. Even with a tremble, it lit up the darkest parts of the room.

"Gv-ge-yu-i."

I repeated it back to her, though the edges of it were too rough to be considered a perfect echo, with a smile that had never been as brilliant as hers and couldn't come close now.

I left quickly before she realized the effort it took to maintain it, the clock ticking off the minutes in the hallway an anxious bass line against my bones.

* * *

The walk from our brick parsonage with the cracked concrete porch to the curb was a short one, but the church's looming figure was a heavy weight against my back. Not so long ago, it'd been my second home. Its members, the extended family I'd grown up with. But that was when my world still existed in colors, and things mostly made sense.

Then Dad walked out two months ago. Literally packed up his bag and stepped out the door to get in his car with the girlfriend no one had known even existed, leaving behind his family and faithful congregation to pick up the pieces of his betrayal.

The congregation probably thought they were doing their Christian duty, allowing their former pastor's poor "Indian" wife and her mixed babies to stay in the parsonage for three more months. Maybe they were. Maybe that was all the Bible required: a handful of weeks' housing for the woman they'd side-eyed for her skin despite her role in the church. Heaven knew I clearly had been misled on some things.

My arms were covered in goose pimples when I lowered myself onto the curb, the night's lingering chill biting into the back of my thighs through my jeans. Winter was close, its whisper in the air and, with it, the sharp reminder that time was running out for us.

I scrubbed at my face, bare of any kind of makeup today, as it'd been yesterday and the day before, and stretched out my legs.

I was too damn young to feel this damn old.

The door opened behind me, a creak followed by a slam that made my spine go straight.

Tabby walked past me without pause, her silence a cruel punch to my already sore chest. She'd been the voice across the room when the night was thick. Now her resentment was as thick as most of our nights and days.

I closed my eyes and counted breaths. Five in. Five hold. Five out. It was a grounding trick, something Dr. Briar had taught me for the moments when the anxiety crept rather than stormed in. I don't think either of us realized how often I would feel like I was going to sink.

The street shook itself awake around me. Doors slammed and people hollered and squirrels and birds chattered and chirped as cars roared to life. And cutting through that mild morning chaos, there was the familiar rumble of an old engine.

I stood quickly, eyes flying open and immediately drawn to the black Grand Am rolling toward me. I was reaching for the door handle before it even came to a full stop.

Lucy didn’t smile before noon, but her bright red painted lips quirked up as she reached for the radio, nail polish the same shade as her lipstick, and turned down Johnny Cash.

“Rough night, Smith?” she asked, her voice still lined with sleep, as I settled in beside her as her copilot.

“Could ask you the same, Vega.”

She grimaced, her lovely face twisting around tired eyes.

“Same old, same old. Ricky brought home another shit report card—he’s failing Spanish of all fool-headed things—and Marco didn’t come home again.”

I winced, and for long moments the noisy idling engine was the only sound between us.

She sighed, then nodded at the bottle of water in the cup holder and pulled back out onto the street.

I rustled in my bag on the floorboard until I found the hollow blue compact with the compass on top. It swung wildly for a minute before settling on due north.

On Lucy.

She wasn’t watching me closely, she couldn’t and keep her eyes on the road at the same time, but we were always at least semi-aware of the other.

“Just one?” she asked, brows scrunched together as I opened the compact and took out a pill. I popped it in my mouth and chased it with the water before it had a chance to leave a bitter coat on my tongue.

“Yeah. I’m off the lithium.”

She cut her eyes at me. “Won’t that up your risk for mania?”

A laugh bubbled up in my throat, like the cheap champagne we’d nicked from her parents’ liquor cabinet and drunk cross-legged in her basement, toasting ourselves, our ancestors, and the crooked stars we were born under.

“You sound like WebMD,” I told her, and it wasn’t an insult. Lucy had become a walking resource on all things bipolar II since I’d been diagnosed two years ago.

“And you didn’t answer my question.” It was too soft to be angry, but too firm to be shrugged off.

Outside the window, open fields and dense patches of trees with their thinning red, yellow, and orange leaves and the occasional aging farmhouse gave way to towering Revolutionary homes and quaint bricked storefronts. The sunlight chose that moment to come back, and I looked away, annoyance flaring and coursing through my veins, leaving them bruised.

“Calculated risk,” I replied. The thick grayness that had settled in the space between my lungs crept into my voice. “Apparently the confusion and trouble remembering basically everything was a pretty sizable red flag. Also the weight gain, the fact that my hands wouldn’t stop shaking, and the weird salty taste that I couldn’t get rid of were all signs that maybe it wasn’t the right med for me.”

She wrinkled her nose. “It’s about time. There’s roughly a million other mood stabilizers out there and they had you on the oldest one. What about your Celexa?”

“We kept it the same. Twenty milligrams twice a day. We’ll ‘revisit’ the dosage in two weeks and consider other options to add to it.”

Lucy could swear in two languages, and she did so in both now.

“I know,” I said.

Her grip on the wheel was tight, bleaching her tan knuckles bone white, crescent moons against the midnight leather.

Finally she nodded and fumbled in the console for the twin pairs of sunglasses we kept there. I leaned forward and turned the radio back up, searching through the crackling stations till I found our girl Dolly.

I slid my pair of dime-store shades on and looked over at her as I sat back, her fingers drumming a lazy beat on the shifter, the pale sunlight caressing her thick black hair. Lucy was the kind of effortlessly cool that stuck with you. Quiet and steady and sure, the loyal middle daughter of Cuban immigrants. She was battered hand-me-down leather jackets and discount geek shirts and a red string tied around her ankle.

She was third-grade sleepovers and tenth-grade parties and as certain—maybe more—as the ground beneath my shoes.

She caught me staring and flashed me that almost smile, and the sudden flood of gratitude for the girl next to me was overwhelming.

I loved her.

It wasn’t the kind of love that filled my gut with butterflies or made me cover the pages in my notebook with my first name and her last. It wasn’t marriage certificates or baby names. It was something older than that. Quieter. It was bones knowing bones, and being built with pieces of the same exploding star.

I shifted slightly in my seat, a little closer to her, but only just, as she flipped on the signal to turn down the street the school was tucked away on. “Tired sisters,” I muttered.

“Weary daughters,” she replied in the same tone.

She glanced at me, and suddenly my bones ached a little less.

* * *

I moved through the day like I always did. Mindlessly shuffling from class to class, relying on muscle memory to perform the most mundane tasks and socialization. There were pages to read and notes to take, and my hand moved across the paper robotically. It matched my smile and my hollow words to people who'd one day be close friends again. I remembered little. I rarely did. Dr. Briar said that would improve as the lithium left my system completely.

Until then, I existed. I slid between my classmates and classes, my mask slipping the moment I was sure no one was looking in my direction, something that was happening more often as of late. It'd be easy to get lost here, in the spaces where I felt like a ghost, a spirit who couldn't touch or be touched. It'd be easy, so easy, to drown.

But I kept swimming back toward shore.

Back toward Mama. The littles. Tabby.

I kept swimming back to Lucy.

* * *

Lucy pushed her plate of fries across the perma-sticky table toward me. I didn't have to say I wasn't hungry, and she didn't have to remind me food was generally important for survival. I took one because she wanted me to, and she tipped her head at me, shoving a handful in her own mouth.

I scanned the crowded cafeteria while I chewed, looking at and for nothing in particular, but my eyes landed on Tabby anyway. She was seated at a table close to the center of the room, laughing at something without any real conviction on her face.

I frowned. It was comfortable on my face, worn in from all the recent overuse. I forced myself to swallow the lump of fry, cringing when it settled in my gut like stone. I shouldn't have felt the sharp pang of jealousy, both that Tabby could laugh with others but not me and that she was better at pretending than I was.

Lucy was humming under her breath. It was low, too low almost, a barely-there whisper that I shouldn't have been able to hear in the dull roar that was a hundred-plus kids squeezed into a space designed for maybe half of them, but Lucy was my moon, and if music comes from the sky, it draws your attention.

It worked as she no doubt intended it to. I took a deep breath. Another. Then I pulled my eyes from Tabby and snagged a few more fries before

shoving the plate back at Lucy.

“It’s not you,” Lucy said quietly, picking up a fry and popping it in her mouth.

“Could be,” I replied, and reached across the table to pull her straw wrapper toward me, mostly to have something to do with my hands. “She’s mad at me again. I wouldn’t let her go to the mall on Saturday with Gina. Her brother was gonna drive them.”

“David?” Lucy scowled. “He lost his license.”

“Exactly.” I twisted the wrapper into a tight rope, focusing on the process more than was entirely necessary.

“She’ll get over it,” Lucy said firmly. “That boy is reckless at best. I wouldn’t put my worst enemy in a vehicle with him.”

“I mean. I might.”

There was that laugh, and I was laughing, too, and even our amusement was in harmony.

If there was a life before this one, Lucy and I had been together in that one, too.

“Fourteen is such an obnoxious age,” Lucy continued. “God. Remember us at fourteen? We could be such little shits.”

“You never were,” I pointed out. “You just went along with my schemes.”

“Which mostly involved us being little shits.” She reached for my bottle of soda.

I snorted. “We sound like a pair of grandmas right now.”

“Aren’t we, though?” She nodded at someone over my shoulder and took a long drink. “I don’t know about you, but my hips are killing me.”

“My back has been giving me hell lately. Bet we’re gonna have rain soon.”

“Lord knows we need it.” We were interrupted by Shannon, who was kind enough not to mention the fact that we’d stopped sitting at our old table and invited us to a party I already planned on skipping at her brother’s house. Once she’d left, Lucy turned back to me. “So what’s the plan for today?”

“Kids have a doctor’s appointment.” I gave up trying to twist my paper rope any tighter and started smoothing it back out. “Four.”

Lucy flashed me a grin. “Perfect. I love when we get to cruise over there.”

I didn’t try to protest. Didn’t try to wave her off and insist we could take the bus. Instead, I gave her a small smile and a quick exhale, a quiet thanks in the language only we spoke.

* * *

The second half of the day passed like the first. Hazy and distant. It wouldn't always be like this. My doctors kept reassuring me that it only took the right combo of medicines and therapy and I'd feel more like the girl I used to be; but for now, that switch in my brain labeled high and low was flipped down. If I was lucky, this would be as bad as it got.

Lucky and I weren't always on speaking terms.

* * *

"I love this part of town," Lucy declared, eyes hungrily taking in the tidy brick buildings full of shops and cafés and diners. The cobble sidewalks were crowded, a mix of teenagers and old-timers and construction workers who'd knocked off early. "We don't come here nearly enough."

In the backseat, Pauly sat forward and nodded enthusiastically. "Yeah, Lucy."

Lucy glanced in the rearview mirror and smiled at him, melting his baby six-year-old heart to a puddle. Pauly thought she'd hung the stars. "Hell yes, little dude. We need to hang out here more."

She was still smiling when she looked over at me. "We should move here after we graduate. Live in one of those little apartments over a store."

She was always saying things like that, placing a future version of us in different locations, like trying on dresses for prom. I grinned back at her like I always did. Because something about imagining that us, older and wiser and different, made my lungs feel a little less tight.

"The bookstore," I said. "Maybe we can get jobs there. We'd be so hipster cool."

"Yes." Lucy hit the wheel with her palm. "God, I can already smell the pages and coffee."

Marisa was staring out the window when I glanced back at her, her tiny chin resting on her knobby knees. At nine, she was all long limbs and sharp angles, and a thick wall of silence. She'd always been a quiet kid, the calm beat before Pauly's stomp of noise, but now she was a lost daddy's girl, hiding in it.

My throat was hot and full of glass, the knot in my chest tighter and heavier when I turned back around.

Now.

Then.

Before.

After.

This was how our lives were measured these days. There was us before with Daddy and us now without him. I wondered if we'd ever be able to get our feet under us to navigate the without or if it'd always be like this. Five ships, lost at sea, looking for a lighthouse and only finding darkness where it once stood.

I wanted to hate him for what he did to us. For Pauly, too young, too innocent, too baby sweet to understand Daddy wasn't coming home. I wanted to hate him for tucking in Marisa that last time, kissing her forehead like he always did, knowing he wouldn't be there to put her on the school bus in the morning. I wanted to hate him for Tabby's anger and the lines bracketing Mama's lips that hadn't been there before.

I wanted to hate him for me, too. For leaving me behind to daddy his children when I still needed one myself.

But I was too tired.

Hate like that took work to keep up, and all my energy was dedicated to surviving.

He was gone.

I was here.

And Lucy was driving.

* * *

Marisa was called in first. When I rose to follow her, she shook her head, small and slight without meeting my eyes. On the one hand, I was relieved. It was one less thing for me to do, one less interaction I had to have. On the other, here was proof that I was failing. Neither of my sisters needed nor wanted me. I was a poor substitute for who they did need. Lucy winced when I sat back with a sigh before leaning over the arm of her chair toward me.

"Did I tell you Ricky has a girlfriend? Apparently, they met online and they're in love and gonna get married," she said, her voice low and amused.

I quirked an eyebrow at her. "He's fifteen."

She laughed like rolling thunder. "Which the entire family pointed out to him numerous times. He also doesn't know her real name or where she's from, which in my opinion puts a little bit of a kink in things."

Pauly fidgeted next to me, and I smoothed a hand over his sandy hair. "Where did he even meet her?"

"He wouldn't say." Lucy straightened and nodded toward the nurse walking into the waiting room with a folder in her hands. "I'll wait for Marisa," she said a second before Pauly's name was called.

I squeezed her fingers as I took Pauly's hand and followed the nurse back.

* * *

He chattered the entire time; he always did, words flowing out of his little mouth in a steady stream. Dr. Raza nodded and chuckled as she looked him over before declaring him healthy.

She waited until I'd helped Pauly down before he could attempt it himself and was reaching for his and Marisa's checkout paperwork.

"And you?" she asked softly, her hijab the deep blue of twilight, her eyes burning bright like stars beneath it. "How have you been doing since you saw Dr. Briar on Friday?"

Pauly shifted from foot to foot in front of me, anticipating what was coming next but too polite to outright ask for it.

Dr. Raza smiled down at him with amusement as she dug into her pocket and produced a handful of stickers. He was bent over them instantly, a finger slipping into his mouth as he considered his options with all the grave seriousness only a six-year-old can accomplish.

She stared at me over his head, patient but steady.

"I don't know," I told her honestly.

She nodded, taking my answer for what it meant and what it didn't. "Are you safe?"

My yes came quick and firm.

"Good. If that changes—"

I cut her off with a too-sharp "I'll call." I wasn't sure if I could hear the same information yet again without wanting to crawl out of my skin.

I hustled Pauly out of the room and down the hall as he held his stickers up for my approval. Lucy and Marisa met us at the checkout desk.

Lucy shook her head at me as they settled in beside me and Pauly to wait; she'd tried and failed to draw Marisa into conversation. I blew out a ragged breath, and Lucy's shoulder found mine, the pressure gentle but unwavering.

My hand barely shook when it was our turn, and I passed the paperwork to the smiling receptionist in bright Scooby-Doo scrubs.

* * *

Later. It was always later. The day always slipped through my fingers, minutes like grains of sand, my palm suddenly empty.

Coming into a darkening house. Homework. Dinner was fry-bread tacos, almost like Elisi used to make. Mine most often came out of a discount store

can.

The light bled out of the sky, and Tabby's key never turned in the lock. After too many phone calls, I finally tracked her down at Gina's. She was staying the night, she told me defiantly, daring me to argue with her. I was too emptied out, too soul sick, to hear how I wasn't her mother.

I left a note for her real one, next to the plate she'd heat up when she finally came stumbling in, hands shaky and fumbling, petite feet swollen in her cheap clogs.

The littles took showers, and Pauly still needed help with his. His voice filled the small space, echoing off the tiled walls. The question didn't come until I was drying him off.

"River?" His hazel eyes were wide in his baby-chubby face. My hands stilled, towel over his hair.

"Yeah, bubbie?"

The urge to frame those cheeks, my brown against his tan, Mama's genes contrasted against Daddy's, rose and fell in time with his smile.

"When's Daddy coming home?"

My heart gave a lurch.

"I don't know, bud," I told him, my voice the only light-as-a-feather, stiff-as-a-board Mama would ever let me play. I resumed scrubbing his short hair dry. "What did you say Tanner did again?"

And he was off, filling my ears with playground gossip.

In their room, I picked and laid out their clothes for the next morning. Marisa never wanted me to tuck her in, but Pauly did. He looked tiny in his race-car bed as I pulled the covers up to his chin and laid a kiss on his head. Marisa twitched when my lips met her damp crown, but her watery eyes met mine when I pulled away.

"Story?" Pauly's sleepy voice stopped me at the door.

"Tomorrow," I told him, the lie singeing my tongue. Guilt tugged at me, but we were old friends, and I carried it with me as I walked through the house and flipped off lights and checked the doors.

My hand trailed against the walls as I made my way down the hall to my room, the drywall unyielding against my fingers. Would the walls of our new home be as solid? Would they be able to contain us? Or would our grief, our heartache, our anger, our anxiety, spill out, saturating whatever new street we ended up on?

I didn't bother with pajamas. Just stripped off my day clothes and collapsed onto my bed in my underwear, worn sheets soothing against tender

skin, the familiar quiet of the house settling around me.

I stretched my fingers toward the moonlight crawling across the floor, but they fell short.

My hand dropped.

I rolled onto my back.

And I broke around a dry sob.

My edges blurred against the faded stars on my old sheets. Pieces crumbled, drifted away, scattered across scratched wood and collected in corners. The clock in the hall ticked off the minutes, a separate pulse in my ear, and Tabby's empty twin bed loomed across the room.

I blinked against the heat behind my eyes. Blinked again as Lucy crawled through the window on a moonbeam, curtains rustling around her. She peeled away from the silvery light to step toward the shadows.

Toward me.

I slid over to the wall out of habit, and a beat later her shoulder was a solid weight against mine.

I couldn't see Tabitha's empty side of the room over Lucy's body. I couldn't drown in that treacherous silence where Tabby's voice should have been because Lucy's steady breathing filled it.

My fingers twisted in the sheets until they found hers.

She sighed and tightened her grip.

"Marco called. He'll be home in two days. Took off to New York of all things, on Daddy's money, too. Daddy went nuclear."

I tried my voice. It came out mostly steady. "They're lucky they have you. All of them. You're the lighthouse in the middle of Ricky and Marco's storm."

"Hush now," she whispered in that way she always did when I handed her exactly what she needed.

The quiet felt less malicious now that Lucy was guarding it.

"This is all going to pass," she said after a few minutes. "This isn't forever."

She was talking about all of it. This low, the numbness and darkness as my meds were adjusted. Tabby and Marisa and Pauly. She was talking about plates in the microwave and appointments for other people in my planner and the clumsy dance of trying to find a new normal, and she said it like a belief and a prayer.

For a moment, one long, blessed moment, I believed it, too.

"I'm slipping," I confessed to the space between us. "Losing myself."

The blankets rustled as her hand slipped up and wrapped around my wrist, the pads of her fingers resting against my pulse point.

“You’re right here,” she breathed back. “We’ll call your doctor in the morning if we need to. But in the meantime, you are right here.”

My “yeah” came out hoarse and full of gravel.

“I see you, Reynolds,” she continued, attaching my mama’s name to me in a way that felt right. “I see you. You are your mother’s strength and your grandmothers’ bravery and you are *fire*. I see you. I see you.”

Her face was mostly in shadow, but my eyes found and traced her features from memory.

“I see *you*.”

Her smile was swift and lovely. “I know.”

It was a promise and a reminder. A pinky swear made in her backyard with dirt caked under our nails turned a blood oath pledged while huddled in the darkness under the covers. It was what had drawn us together, forged our souls. It was the foundation we were built on and the light that guided us through the moments when the night had claws.

It was our song, our ballad, and we sang it to each other now in low whispers and weary sighs as she slowly and methodically gathered up all my broken parts and stitched me back together with experienced fingers.

“I see you.”

“I know.”

The shadows retreated to the dusty corners. They’d be there in the morning. They always were.

But so was Lucy.

Mother Nature's Youngest Daughter

KEAH BROWN

MILLIE HADN'T CREATED her first storm yet, but she knew when oneb was brewing. She shut her locker door just as she heard gum pop. Millie pressed her books to her chest and sighed. She could tell who it was without looking: Kacey Donovan and the Miserables, her band of flunkies who had been tormenting Millie since elementary school. Millie's mother had taught her that hate took up too much room in the heart to be considered anything but useless. However, Millie felt like she had just enough room for Kacey.

"Hey, freak," Kacey spat as she walked up to Millie's closed locker door. The Miserables trailed behind her. Millie nearly gagged at their matching outfits in varying shades of purple. Not even Millie's twin sister and brother, Mary and Finn, did that.

"You're looking terrible today, as usual. Maybe you couldn't tell, even with those huge glasses on your face. Are you wearing your sibling's hand-me-downs again? Do they give you a lot of room to hobble around in? Or do you just enjoy looking as good as cat pee smells?"

In that moment, Millie hated her best friend, Whitney, for being out sick today. She would've had a comeback that stopped Kacey cold. Whitney was the levelheaded one in their friendship but was always ready and willing to fight Kacey with words. Millie preferred action. She knew the risks of exposing herself and her family, but Kacey needed to be taken down.

As she turned her back to her locker and Kacey, she caught her siblings' curious eyes from across the hall. She sent them a silent prayer for intervention. This brand of bullying was not news in their household. Millie couldn't remember a week when she hadn't come home angry or in tears over Kacey's childish cruelty. But the longer it went on, the less sympathetic Millie's older siblings grew. They wanted her to stop crying and do something about it. Across the hall, Mary came close to helping, clenching and unclenching her fist, while Finn simply shook his head. After a silent

argument between the two, Mary mouthed a sorry Millie's way, and she and Finn turned the corner.

Millie faced her own personified hell.

"What is it today, Kacey?" Millie asked. The Miserables moved closer, surrounding her. Lacey, Kacey's right-hand woman and head Miserable, chuckled.

"I just came to ask you a few questions," Kacey said. "Deena says your sister Mariah was a loser, too."

"And without as much effort," Tracey, the Miserable in the brightest shade of purple, cut in. Her eyes traveled down to Millie's right hand and leg. Millie's hand curled into a fist involuntarily, and she wished with all her might she had the strength to punch Tracey, Lacey, *and* Kacey.

Kacey winked at Tracey, and the small hint of praise lit up Tracey's eyes like Christmas trees. Millie wanted to laugh at how pathetic it all was, but they'd only get going again.

"Actually, Mariah is amazing and twice the woman your sister is. And honestly, don't you think it's a little sad that Deena is still worrying about my sister all these years later?" Millie asked.

Kacey rolled her eyes and opened her mouth to speak, but Millie cut her off.

"Oh, and the hand and limp jokes are so original." Millie switched her books to the right side of her body to get it used to more weight. Away from the school's watchful eye, Finn and Mary had been helping her work at her goal to lessen the strain on the left side of her body. Today they obviously didn't want to be seen caring about the drama of freshmen, so they left her hanging like she wasn't family at all.

"Maybe not, but they're still effective, aren't they?" Kacey paused for a beat and smirked at the way Millie's face fell. The action put pep in her step. "Oops." Kacey knocked Millie's books out of her arm while her Miserables laughed, as if on cue, before they all walked away. Millie flipped them off, and when she bent down to grab her books, she saw Mrs. Arnold turn her head quickly. Millie knew she was supposed to be the bigger person, but when her siblings and her teachers refused to step in, why should she be?

And her classmates. They never defended her. Not because they were scared; they just didn't care enough. They let Kacey run rampant. And the Miserables were always making fun of her for the tiniest things. Mother Nature raised her youngest daughter to believe that everything about her was beautiful, especially her cerebral palsy. Millie may have been the only sibling

in her family with a physical disability, but it wasn't an issue at home the way it was at school. At school, the kids who thought Kacey was wrong for the way she treated Millie said nothing when it counted. The teachers who cared sent her to detention and to the principal's office, but most of them looked the other way because Kacey's family gave a lot of money to the school. After today, Millie had enough. She'd spent too many days being harassed and too many days doing nothing about it. Millie had to toughen up like her siblings told her to and take matters into her own hands.

After Millie got to class, she sat down in a huff. Her desk was at the back of the room and out of her teacher's eye line, so she had the time to sit, doodle, and think. Millie had watched a lot of romantic comedies this past summer while her mother was at work and her siblings out with their friends. She watched them for the romance, admittedly, but there was often revenge, too. The type of revenge that she could pull off. Millie could get red dye from the art department and pour it on Kacey's clothes during gym class. (Her teacher always excused Millie early so she'd have enough time to change.) Or she could use her morning announcements position to start a gross rumor about Kacey. The problem with those ideas was that Millie would be the clear culprit.

Millie lifted the pen from the shoe she was drawing on. She was three hearts in on her left sneaker and wanted six on each, but before she knew it, she was drawing hearts without worrying about the number. She needed a plan that wouldn't implicate her so quickly. There was one other thing … But it was risky. Millie tapped her pen on her desk as she weighed the pros and cons. The execution would be messy because Millie still had a lot to learn, but she always picked things up quickly. Her body wasn't aching today, and yet she knew she should take it easy. Millie could do all the damage she wanted with just a twirl of her finger. Mother Nature always said practice makes perfect, didn't she? Well, Millie could practice honing her snow element on Kacey. She grinned at the thought.

* * *

After a torturous lunch period, where Tracey, still high from her earlier praise, stuck her foot out, causing Millie to trip and fall into her tray of mac and cheese, Kacey started a childish chant in the hallway: *Millie Billie the ugly tramp*.

But Millie had patience. During her free period, when she was delivering papers to teachers from the office, she put her plan into action.

She designed her route so that she would first have to drop the papers off at the classroom just past Kacey's locker on the second floor. This gave her an alibi. She could hear Whitney in her head as she walked. *Snow? Mill, seriously? Do you want to get caught?* But when Millie got to Kacey's locker, she let out a breath and cleared her head. She couldn't open the locker without raising suspicion, so she'd have to do the job without seeing where the snow would land. Her hands began to shake as she lifted them, a sign that her nerves had set in. She let out another breath and lowered her hands. Millie was excited, but she couldn't let her nerves get the best of her. In order to create the snow, Millie imagined it traveling through her veins and materializing in her hands. The process made her body shiver, but she didn't mind. This was the only way she knew to make the snow appear; this was how it worked when she practiced in secret at home; and this was how it would have to work here. She closed her eyes for a moment and opened them again when her hands stopped shaking, the snow at the tips of her fingers, waiting for her command. She raised them once more, her hands gesturing toward Kacey's locker like Vanna White, willing the snow to appear *there*.

After she finished with Kacey's locker, she heard Whitney again. *Okay, Mill, that was enough. Finish the papers and go back to class.*

Millie wanted to. But she couldn't quite control her powers yet. She was younger than her siblings were when her element developed, and she always lost control a little when she was nervous. And so the snow kept on materializing. More than she had intended. The only thing she could do was to stick it in Tracey's locker. Thankfully, Tracey's locker was close enough to Kacey's.

* * *

Millie would've felt a little guilty if it were anyone else, but Kacey only cared about what people thought of her. If she was distracted by her own humiliation, Millie might have a few days of torture-free high school. Millie's next stop was Mr. Diaz's fourth-period Spanish class, where she knew she would find Kacey. Millie handed the forms to Mr. Diaz, then stood off to the side to wait for him to sign them.

Millie didn't consider herself an angry or petty person, but sometimes, when opportunity knocks, you should be polite and answer the door. Millie saw Kacey's half-unzipped backpack on the floor. Kacey was turned around, talking to the girl in the seat behind her. Millie glanced at Mr. Diaz and saw he was still signing papers, so the coast was clear. Long gone were the nerves

she had at Kacey's locker, and in their place was the confidence of a girl on a mission. She tapped her leg four times, and a small pile of snow for every book Kacey had knocked out of her arms earlier now sat in Kacey's backpack. Millie also put twenty snowflakes in the bottom of Kacey's purse. She smiled to herself. Slowly, her account with Kacey was getting settled.

"You're all set, Señorita Fairway. Thank you for the papers," Mr. Diaz said as he handed Millie the stack of papers. She took a moment to nod politely at him. Spanish wasn't her favorite subject, but he was her favorite teacher. He believed in her and always encouraged her art, even when he caught her drawing in his class.

"De nada," Millie replied.

Millie walked as fast as she could down the stairs, her hand holding tight to the railing as the bag full of papers smacked against her right leg. She had three minutes left of her free period when she reached the office. She dropped off the papers with the secretary and made a beeline for Kacey's locker.

The sound of Kacey's shrieks was going to make Millie smile for months. Snow everywhere in the middle of April? Well, she thought it was genius. Millie made it upstairs and across the hall from Kacey's locker just as the bell rang. She caught her breath and waited silently as Kacey opened her locker. Millie hoped her snow looked good. Crisp and fluffy and milky white. She practiced after dinner on weekends when she knew she could sneak the mop up to her room to hide the evidence. However, when Kacey's locker door opened wide enough for Millie to see her handiwork, there was much more snow than she had intended. Obviously Millie still had a lot of learning to do. She sighed and focused back on the task at hand: Kacey's reaction. First, the shock came, quickly followed by the shriek Millie was hoping for. As the hallway filled with students who heard Kacey's screams, Millie realized the gravity of what she had done. Knowing her mother, it was likely that she already knew what Millie had done today. The crowd that normally fed Kacey's ego now aided in her mortification as she began to sob.

"Nice job, sis," Finn said, seemingly appearing out of thin air. He crossed his arms and leaned against the lockers to her left.

"Acknowledgment from you at school?" Millie kept her gaze on the scene in front of her. "I'm touched."

"It's what she deserves," Mary chimed in from her right side. Millie studied her sister for a moment. Mary was a nonviolent type. She preferred to get her revenge by being the better person, but Millie was happy she had made an exception for this.

“So, what did you do with the rest of it?” Finn asked, turning to Millie conspiratorially. “I *know* this isn’t all the snow you have in your heart.”

She thought about lying only briefly. Kacey shut her locker with a huff before bursting into tears again, and students flickered away from the scene.

“Tracey’s locker?” Mary switched her backpack from her right to her left side. Millie’s mouth opened slightly. *How did Mary know?* “Nice.”

* * *

Kacey left school in tears, and Millie was able to enjoy the rest of her day in relative silence. Her only distractions were the murmurs from other kids about who could’ve done it, but she stayed quiet, vowing to tell only Whitney. Millie was on cloud nine.

At least, until she got home.

“You did something. I can feel it,” Mother Nature said as soon as Millie stepped inside the house, a house Millie loved despite the fact that awkward pictures of her and her siblings lined the entryway. Mother Nature was into photography and candid photos, even when Millie had just woken up and before she’d brushed her teeth. She also loved earth tones and blues that matched the ocean. She made sure the house had different shades of blue accents in every room, with cream on every wall except the kitchen. The kitchen had been green for four months after Mother Nature fell in love with the color called fern. Where Millie stood now, as she faced her doom at the front door, was on a red carpet that ran from the entryway of the house to the start of the kitchen. This Aegean rug was new; two weeks ago there had been a shorter, teal one in its place. Sometimes her mother was such a cliché.

“I’m giving you one chance to tell me what it was.”

Millie put on her perfected “I’m the baby” face and said nothing. If she were being honest, Millie knew that there was no getting out of this, but as a first-time offender, she figured her mother would go easy on her. Still, Millie wondered how Mother Nature knew what had happened so quickly and narrowed it down to two people in her mind. When Mary and Finn rounded the corner, she spoke.

“You rats,” Millie bit out.

“We didn’t tell,” Mary whispered. “We thought it was great.”

“She means we were as appalled as you, Ma,” Finn cut in when their mother turned on them. He eyed Mary, who shrugged an apology.

Millie bit her lip. She walked slowly to the living room couch, where she dropped her backpack before plopping down next to it. She was caught.

“Millicent Grace Fairway, why did you put snow in that girl’s locker, purse, and backpack?” Mother Nature asked calmly. She followed her daughter into the living room and waited for her to speak. The calm before the storm—Millie hadn’t experienced it before this moment, but she knew what was coming from watching her siblings’ faces. The thought of her mother’s anger made Millie angry. She understood the risk she had taken; her decision had been impulsive, but necessary. Mother Nature didn’t know what it was like to live in Millie’s body and to go to a school that didn’t care how she was being treated.

“How did you know?” Millie asked. The anger and fear she felt at being the weakest person in the family was bubbling up inside her, nearing the back of her throat. She fought the urge to let it out.

“I’m Mother Nature. I know everything.”

“Well, and word travels fast,” Mariah said. Millie’s eldest sister did little to hide the pride in her voice.

“It wasn’t that big of a deal,” Millie said.

“You put snow in a girl’s backpack!” Mother Nature yelled. “In April!”

“Honestly, you guys are lucky I didn’t do worse,” Millie said.

“You *couldn’t* have done worse,” Finn said chidingly.

“This kind of attitude is exactly why we don’t let children begin training until their junior year,” Mother Nature sighed. “You are just not mature enough.”

“I mean, the execution could’ve been better, if you ask me,” Finn commented. Millie turned around to glare at him.

“I didn’t ask,” she shot back.

“Silence,” Mother Nature commanded. “Mariah, Mary, Finn, please leave.”

“But, Ma…” Finn nudged Mary for support, and his twin sister ignored him. Mary knew when to pick her battles. After all, her mom had let her make it rain for four days straight when her ex-boyfriend Kyle broke up with her last month to date her ex–best friend Gina.

“Leave,” Mother Nature ordered.

Without any more protests, the three siblings stood up and walked to their rooms. Millie’s eyes remained on her shoes, counting the hearts she had drawn on them earlier that day.

Fourteen … fifteen … sixteen …

“Millicent Grace, look at me,” Mother Nature said after her other children shut their doors. “I would’ve been proud of you coming into your element

two years early if you weren't putting us at risk. Your dad would've probably high-fived you behind my back…" Mother Nature trailed off, thinking of her late husband. He'd tell her to go easy on his Millie Belle. Mother Nature smiled to herself at the thought.

"Ma?" Millie watched from the chair as her mother turned slightly away from her and toward the past.

"Do you want us to get caught?"

"No. I'm sorry, Ma. I didn't mean for it to get that big. I was just playing around," Millie said. She pressed her toe into the floor. She had reached the end of her rope, like Carrie, but without all the blood and death. There was only so much one person could take.

Seventeen … eighteen … nineteen …

Millie wished her mom understood that not everyone had good in them. She wished that her mother could spend a day in her shoes. Maybe then she would be congratulating her instead of punishing her.

"I know those kids are cruel, but every inch of you is beautiful. They will never take that away from you if you don't let them," Mother Nature said.

"You think it's that easy? If you heard the things they said to me, you wouldn't even be upset about the snow. You would be patting me on the back," Millie said.

"Sweetie, I just don't want to see you lose your sense of self because of these kids at school. I don't want you to forget how wonderful you are," Mother Nature said.

"I don't hate myself or anything. I believe it when you say I'm pretty. But when you hear the same insults and jokes and slurs for so long, despite knowing they're not true, a small part of you starts to wonder," Millie shot back, crossing her arms in protest.

"You are angry, sweetie, and rightfully so, but the moment anyone figures out who I am, who we are, any chance we have at a 'normal' life will cease to exist. Do you want that?" Mother Nature asked.

"No, but Kacey is Satan's spawn. She breathes fire, and she deserved worse," Millie said, uncrossing her arms and pressing her hands together between her legs. Millie and Mother Nature sighed in unison.

"I wish I didn't have to do this, Mill, but you're grounded for a week. There will be no cell phone and no TV. Go to your room and get washed up before dinner." Well, there went her plan to call Whitney.

When Millie got to her room, Mary created sympathy rain for Millie. She knew how much Millie loved the rain and hoped it might make her feel a little

better. Millie closed her door and sat on her bed. She couldn't stomach the look of disappointment on her mother's face. Millie had gone in too confidently. Sure, her punishment could have been worse, but nothing was worse than the defeated look in her mother's eyes. She could have gotten them caught, and who knows what would've happened. Her sisters and brother had told her horror stories of the families that had had their job before them—before it was decided that her family would only be responsible for the United States, so as to take some of the pressure off. Millie's siblings said each of the families' demises were at the hand of the youngest child. She wasn't sure she believed them. Millie also wasn't that keen on learning the truth.

When dinner was over and everyone returned to their rooms, Millie was still racked with guilt over the fact that she had done something bad but didn't feel bad about it. The only reason she felt guilty was because her mother was right: In the moment, she hadn't thought about her family, just her anger and exhaustion. Just herself. Millie was tired of going to school every day, having to reconcile the fact that her disability, which she liked well enough, was being used as a reason to make fun of her.

"I didn't like her older sister, either," Mariah said, standing in Millie's doorway with a sympathetic smile on her lips.

"Was she a bully, too?" Millie asked as Mariah sat down.

"The biggest. She made me miserable. Deena Donovan was the worst. You know I don't hate many people, but she thrived on the energy she harnessed by being evil. She was jealous because people liked me without me having to bribe them." Mariah paused, rolling her eyes at the memory before continuing. "After Daddy died, Deena pretended to be considerate and left me alone for a week. I thought she was turning a corner, away from her evil, but she spent the next week spreading rumors that I slept with the entire football team. The teachers did nothing, and I resented them for it, too. I got tired of my complaints going unanswered; and the rumor, on top of the name-calling and pushing me into lockers, was the last straw. I got my revenge on Deena eventually."

"What did you do?" Millie asked.

"I made rain follow her and her friends all throughout spring break on their trip to Hawaii. I don't know how Mom found out, but I was grounded for three months." Mariah laughed.

"I bet it was worth it," Millie whispered. She longed for her sister's confidence, her grace. Millie was witty, sure, but she didn't want that to be the

only thing she offered the world.

“You have no idea, Mill. I had lots of friends in high school, but I wasn’t truly sure of myself until the day I decided to do something about the bullying. Deena left me alone after that. I think she thought it was me but didn’t know how to prove it,” Mariah said.

“I didn’t mean to disappoint Mom, but I’m sick of being bullied.” Millie found herself looking down at her elephant-covered socks as she spoke, embarrassed by the fact that she let Kacey and the Miserables get to her, even more so that Mariah was seeing her this way.

“You kicked ass today.” Mariah winked at her sister. “Now don’t move. I’m going to go grab the keys. I want to show you something,” she whispered conspiratorially.

“Okay.” Millie bent down to put her shoes back on. She could still see the horrified look on Kacey’s face; it was definitely worth it. Millie let out a huff and smiled to herself. Maybe she would be fine; maybe she would be as good as Mariah someday. If everyone was being honest with themselves, they knew it was up to Mary, Mariah, or herself to keep the family business going. There was a clear line of succession from her mother to her daughters, and Millie was glad to be last.

* * *

Mariah drove Millie to an abandoned warehouse just outside of town and began her lesson. Millie watched in awe as Mariah made it rain with a simple twirl of her finger. Another swift twirl split the rain in half and brought snow with it. Millie closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, the rain and snow had stopped altogether. Millie’s favorite flowers, gardenias, danced around her as the wind picked up, and she smiled genuinely for the first time in a long time.

“You brought me here to show off.” Millie laughed, spinning in the same direction as her flowers. She spun and spun until she lost her breath and lay down beside Mariah, who was smiling so hard her teeth should’ve hurt.

“This is where Mom and Dad first taught me how to make it rain.” Mariah let the flowers fall into a crown above Millie’s head.

“And Mom brought Mary and Finn here, too?” Millie asked, certain that it was another thing she was being left out of.

“Nope. Just me,” Mariah said confidently.

“Then why bring me here?” Millie asked, opening her eyes for the first time in minutes and turning to face her sister.

“You and I are more alike than you think, Mill. I brought you here to see you smile. I love you, kid.”

“I love you too,” Millie said, reaching out to clasp her sister’s hand.

A Curse, A Kindness

CORINNE DUYVIS

MIA

The collision happens in the space of a second.

Mia—a paper bag in each arm—steps out of the corner store. She's got her head turned toward her grandmother, ready to point out the avocado that's about to roll from a third paper bag in the rollator's basket.

Then there's the other girl, her face a storm, her shoulders hunched.

They crash into each other right in the entrance.

Bam—a shoulder thump, a skull knocking into Mia's jaw, a knee slamming against hers.

Mia drops one bag. Teetering back, she tries to stop the second bag from slipping. Too late. *No no no—the eggs—*

She sidesteps to avoid crashing into her grandmother's rollator, but her balance goes, sending her smacking to the ground with a painful jolt to her hip.

She rubs her side and grimaces. "I'm okay, I'm okay," she says, wanting to assure her grandmother before she has time to worry. She twists onto her knees.

The other girl is leaning back on the ground, arms propping her up. She's about Mia's age, or maybe younger, with white-streaked black hair tied back tight. A cracked Coca-Cola machine beside her blinks in and out, casting a red glow on her angry frown.

"I'm so sorry—I wasn't looking—" Mia starts.

"Forget it." Without looking at Mia, the girl gets to her feet, takes her distance, and dusts herself off. The movement hurts—Mia can tell.

Still sitting on her knees, Mia surveys the damage to the groceries. Could've been worse. The eggs are intact. The groceries are scattered all over, though, and she's blocking the entryway, and, crap, now her grandmother is reaching over to help Mia up.

“I’m fine!” Mia repeats, and hastily climbs to her feet to prove it. She doesn’t want her grandmother making an effort—between her poor balance and bad knee, she’d end up on the ground alongside the groceries. “See? I’m fine. Let me get this.” Mia sinks back into a crouch, all too aware of her grandmother’s eyes on her, and probably the girl’s eyes and other shoppers’ eyes, too. Her cheeks feel hot with embarrassment. So much for helping out her mom by taking her grandmother shopping. And so much for proving to her grandmother that she’s a capable almost-adult instead of the twelve-year-old her grandmother treats her as. The busier her mom becomes at work, the worse her grandmother’s fussing gets.

Something lying beside the egg carton catches her eye. It’s a pinkish tube of ChapStick, cherry flavored. Mia holds it up. The girl is already walking toward the parking lot. Not a word of good-bye or apology. Mia presses her lips together, then calls out, “Hey. Is this ChapStick yours? Here.”

The girl turns back to face them. For a moment, she seems frozen. “You’ve got to be *fucking* kidding me!” she says shrilly.

Mia tilts her head. “’Scuse me?” It comes out more aggressively than she intended, but it’s nowhere near the girl’s level of pissed off.

“Again? It’s been twenty minutes—I just finished—Agh!” The girl stalks back to Mia and snatches the ChapStick from her outstretched arm. “Yes. That’s mine. *Thank* you.”

“Yeah,” Mia says dubiously. “You’re welcome.”

Her grandmother is always telling Mia to make friends instead of being glued to her Nintendo Switch. Normally, she practically shoves Mia at any girl her own age. Right now, though, she’s the one glaring at this stranger. “You ought to apologize.” She jabs a finger at her. “Help my granddaughter collect our things.”

“It’s fine. I can do it.” Mia says it for her grandmother’s benefit alone. To her surprise, though, the girl listens: She sinks down by Mia’s side and pulls one spilled bag close, then takes the fallen meat packs beside it and piles them inside in a straight stack.

“Listen,” the girl says, her voice low. She seems to be looking at Mia’s shoulder more than her face. “You showed me kindness. I need to repay it.”

“Say what now?”

Kindness? Who talks like that?

Who talks like that with the same kind of withering glare Mia’s mom reserves for when she’s talking to her boss on the phone?

“You get three wishes.”

What the hell is one supposed to say to that? “Yeahhh.” Mia slowly reaches for a fallen avocado.

The girl picks up the eggs, checks them even though Mia already did, and holds out the carton. “They look fine.”

“Great.” Mia takes the carton and stuffs it into her bag. She stands upright. “Well, bye.”

“You get three wishes,” the girl repeats, pushing herself to her feet. She’s talking low enough for Mia’s grandmother not to hear. “I’ll explain—”

“I gotta get home.” Mia tucks the bags back under her arms and starts down the street.

Her grandmother gives the other girl a curt nod, although the frown tugging her lips down shows she’s still not happy. “What a rude child. You’re not like that to strangers, are you, Mia?”

“Course not,” she assures her.

“Ah, of course not. We raised you better.”

As they walk, Mia shoots a glance over her shoulder. The girl is still standing by the entrance.

“Start thinking!” she yells.

SIENNA

Sienna gives the girl from the corner store until the next morning, then materializes in the high school bathroom while the girl—Mia, if she’d heard that old woman right—is washing her hands at the sink.

Gross. School bathrooms. School in *general*. Escaping this hellhole had been the one upside of Sienna’s life the last couple of years.

The mirror shows Mia’s mouth dropping open. “You—” She dashes away from the sink. Water sprays from her hands. Her backpack slips off one shoulder. “What the hell?!”

The doors to the bathroom stalls are all open, while the door to the hall is shut. Good. No one’s around. Sienna can’t materialize anywhere someone aside from her current charge can spot her, but there’s always a risk of people walking in or overhearing them.

“Three wishes,” she says. “Go.”

“How did you *do* that? How—what—”

“I can grant wishes, but *this* is the part that surprises you?”

“Wishes?” she says.

“Yes. Three.”

Mia stands there, slack jawed.

It always takes people a while to get past this part. Sienna wrestles back her impatience. “I have to show appropriate gratitude to anyone who shows me kindness. You offered my ChapStick back, even though I bumped into you and spilled all your groceries. It counts.”

The explanation doesn’t always help. And it doesn’t now. Mia is still just staring, frozen in the middle of this dingy bathroom. Her brown eyes are wide; the overhead lighting glares down on her curly halo.

If the gears in her head are turning, it doesn’t show on the outside. Or Sienna doesn’t see it, in any case. She’s not much good at that. What someone looks like and who they are—what they wish for—rarely match up. She’s stopped trying to figure people out. The less she cares, the less their wishes keep her up at night.

“Your name’s Mia, right?” Sienna keeps her eyes on Mia’s shoulder. “If I’m going to be working for you, it helps to know.”

“Yes. Mia.”

She introduces herself. “Sienna.” Why is Mia *looking* at her like that? Fascination? Shock? Bafflement? The stare is so intent it makes her want to snap at the girl, but she holds her tongue.

“You … can grant … wishes.” Slowly Mia pulls her bag back up to her shoulders.

“*Have* to,” Sienna says. The itch to correct her is too strong. “Grant wishes. Yes.”

Whenever someone shows her kindness, something inside gets knocked out of balance. It’s a nauseating feeling, like the pieces of herself don’t fit right. It gets worse the longer she waits to approach the person. Once, she ignored her new charge for a full week, pretending she didn’t owe anyone a damn thing; by the end of that week, she could no longer walk. She spent an hour writhing on her kitchen floor before finally blinking to the house of the guy who’d shown her kindness—(he’d told off some boys badgering her to smile)—to offer him the wishes.

Mia is still watching her. Slowly her expression shifts into something less intense.

Click.

The pieces of Sienna slot back into place. The nausea fading away is a relief, like coming up for air. “Good,” Sienna says. “We’re on the same page.”

Mia still doesn’t say anything. Sienna still can’t quite tell if she’s fascinated or stuck on horrified. “Wish up,” Sienna suggests.

A shrill noise cuts through the bathroom. Mia’s head snaps up. “I have to

get to class. Can we talk after school?”

“I’ll visit you at home.”

“No! I mean, not—don’t teleport in like you did. My family might see you.” She hesitates. “Meet me outside the school later. We’ll go home together.”

“Just call me when you’re home and by yourself. I’ll show up automatically.”

“That’s … weird,” Mia says. “I’d rather just meet after school.”

“Your wish, my command.”

“Wait, I didn’t mean—that wasn’t a wish—”

“Relax. That didn’t count.”

* * *

To reach Mia’s bedroom, they have to cross the living room, where Mia’s grandmother—Sienna recognizes her from the store—is showing a giggling toddler how to peel a banana while a TV drones in the background; then they need to cross the kitchen, where Mia’s mother is unloading the dishwasher with one hand and scrolling through her email on her phone with the other hand. A pop song blares from a nearby Bluetooth speaker.

Mia finishes harried introductions to both and drags Sienna upstairs. She shuts the door behind them, blocking out the noise. Sienna breathes in, out, appreciating the silence. She knew to expect Mia’s family at the house, but she’s not used to talking to people. It’s too risky: They might be kind. Even now that she’s bound to Mia for the time being, it’s hard to suppress those instincts.

On top of that, the music was *loud*. It made it hard to focus on what anyone was saying. She shakes her head as if to send the beats spilling out from her ears, leaving only silence.

Mia crosses the room to reach her bed.

Finally Sienna looks around. The room is overwhelmingly blue—from the bed to the desk chair to the wallpaper—with colorful posters adorning the walls and dozens of video games weighing down the shelves. A widescreen computer dominates the desk, while two handheld gaming devices and a few manga titles lie scattered on tangled bedsheets.

Sienna resists the urge to check out the shelves. (It’ll only bug her if she spots upside-down titles or missing volumes. She needs to focus.) Instead, she thumps into the desk chair and spins it to face Mia, who’s hurriedly straightening the sheets and shoving a plushie behind the pillow.

“Sorry for dragging you upstairs like that,” Mia says. “I didn’t want my grandma to get into what happened at the store again. And my mom’s so happy to see me bringing someone home, she’d have kept you talking for hours. I wish she’d—” She clamps her hand to her mouth, cutting herself off.

“Relax,” Sienna tells her again. “I’m not going to trick you into anything.”

Mia watches her carefully.

“The wish has to be conscious. Intentional. I’m also not going to take your soul after we’re through or purposely misinterpret your wishes and screw you over.”

“How can I trust you?”

Sienna shrugs.

“Heh. Um. I mean.” Mia swallows visibly. “I hadn’t even considered the soul thing.”

Sienna wonders whether that’s a joke or nervousness. Or maybe both. “Look,” she says. “I can only use magic to fulfill wishes or to appear by your side. Even when I’m a world away. That’s the extent of it.”

Mia narrows her eyes. “Can I wish for a thousand wishes?”

“No.” Sienna rattles off her standard spiel, so burned into her brain that she’s sure she hasn’t deviated from it by a single word for at least six years: “No wishing for more wishes, no bringing people back from the dead, no changing the past, no playing with people’s free will *too* much. A nudge is okay—lining up the circumstances enough to make them open to an idea—but a shove is too far. That also rules out world peace, ending capitalism, and solving hunger and disease, since that requires too many people taking action against their will.”

Mia gathers the mangas and games on her bed. She does it slowly, like she’s absorbing Sienna’s words.

“Three wishes,” Sienna prompts.

“So … are you a genie?”

“I don’t think so.” This job didn’t come with a title.

“If you’re not taking my soul or whatever, what’s in it for you?”

Sienna taps her fingers to her left thumb in turn. “Nothing.” Most people go straight to wishing for a billion dollars before asking questions. She doesn’t see the point in lying, though. Might as well get this over with. She keeps her eyes trained on the ceiling as she talks, still touching her fingers to her thumb. “I’m cursed. One winter, when I was nine, I fell through the ice of the nearby lake. An old couple saw what happened. The woman stepped onto the ice and helped me to the shore. The ice cracked before she could get

herself to safety. Her husband—I'm assuming it was her husband—tossed me his cell phone, yelled for me to call an ambulance, and ran to save her."

Sienna hates this next part. But she's also replayed it so often in her head that she's become numb enough to recite what happened without so much as twitching. "I was frozen. Not because of the ice. I just couldn't move. I didn't call anyone. When a car went past, I didn't even flag them. I just stood there. Watching.

"The old man sank through the ice, too. I still didn't do anything. Then a passing car stopped, and someone ran out to help them. The driver looked after me in the meantime. She went to get me a blanket from the trunk, and suddenly, I bolted. Ran home. Didn't know what happened to the couple. Once I recovered a few days later, I was waiting for the school bus, and that same old man who fell through the ice approached. I don't know whether he survived, whether he was a … a ghost or something, or whether he was never human to begin with. But he said I was ungrateful and selfish. That I should learn to repay kindnesses. He cursed me. Laid out the ground rules. I haven't seen him since."

"But you were nine! A kid!" Mia gapes.

"Yes. I know." *An autistic kid*, Sienna thinks, *confused and petrified*. She doesn't linger on the thought. She has anger pulsing in the back of her mind every minute of every day; she doesn't want to whip it up into a whirlwind. It won't change anything except to leave her feeling worse.

Sienna rolls the desk chair closer to Mia, kicking off on the floor. "Three wishes."

Mia goes quiet for a long time, her eyes fixed on Sienna. It's uncomfortable. At first Sienna tries to ignore it. Then she tries to look back, but she gives up in seconds and pretends she was studying the mangas in Mia's lap instead. Finally she spins the chair in slow circles, enjoying the whirl of it, the rhythmic push of her foot against the desk with every go-round. She can wait. She's got time.

"My mom's theater," Mia says then. She speaks slowly, like she's choosing her words carefully, even though Sienna had promised not to misinterpret them. "I want it to succeed."

Sienna stops spinning. "You need to say the word."

Mia breathes deeply. "I *wish* for my mom's theater venture to succeed and become everything she wants it to be."

"Theater?" Sienna says. "That's a strange wish."

"Do I need to explain…?"

“No.” She doesn’t know how it works, but the intent of the wish matters more than the words themselves. And the few times she *has* asked for details out of curiosity, she’s regretted it.

Some wishes hide curses underneath.

Sienna closes her eyes. She reaches for something inside, and—

A phone rings downstairs, cutting through the pop music.

Mia answers the question Sienna hasn’t asked: *Why?*

“My mom has a job—she works in accounting—but she hates it. She says it sucks out her soul. She’s trying to arrange funding to buy a historic playhouse downtown that’s about to be knocked down. She wants to start a youth theater. It’ll host acting and singing and dancing classes, plays and concerts, and it’ll have a little café and a library. It’ll be free for any kid who can’t afford it. She wants to reach out to homeless kids, give them a place to shower and spend their days and—”

Yelling from downstairs interrupts her. “Mia! *Mia!*”

Mia glances at Sienna, then gets up and opens the bedroom door. “Mom?”

“Mia!” She’s standing at the bottom of the stairs. “I just got a call! *The* call! We have funding! *We’re funded!* Come down here!”

Then she runs off, squealing at Mia’s little brother.

“There you go.” Sienna gets up, puts the desk chair back where she found it, and walks out into the hallway. As she passes Mia, she says, “The rest of this wish will happen at a natural pace. I’ll be back for the other two.”

“Wait.” Mia grabs her shoulder before she can move down the stairs.

Sienna’s breath sticks in her throat. She yanks free and turns, wary.

Mia seems to hesitate. “My mom will invite you to stay for dinner. She does that. Especially now that there’s something to celebrate.”

“I once rigged a presidential election. I can say no to someone’s mother.”

“Oh.”

Sienna squints at the look on Mia’s face.

“You could say yes. I mean … if you wanted,” Mia mumbles.

Sienna never stays with her charges longer than is necessary to get the wishes handled. Once you learn the darkest desires of even the most innocent-looking people, spending time with strangers becomes a lot less appealing. She’d rather stay safely at home and come only when called. So her first instinct is to say no.

The only thing stopping her is seeing how fragile Mia looks after extending that invitation. Perhaps she can be kinder in how she turns the girl down.

But she says, “I’d like that.”

* * *

Sienna drops by every day, sometimes at Mia’s school, sometimes at Mia’s home, asking about her second wish. Sometimes she makes suggestions:

A billion dollars?

To bump into someone Mia could fall madly, deeply in love with?

To find a steady group of friends?

A guaranteed safe and healthy life for her family?

A unicorn?

The more they talk, the more specific Sienna’s suggested wishes become:

Does Mia want to be fluent in Japanese—in every language, for that matter?

Does she want her dad to travel for work less?

Does she want that Pokémon MMORPG combining every region, which she says she’s always dreamed of?

Does she want to be a famous manga artist or writer or both?

To nudge a senator or two and push certain legislation through Congress?

Make million-dollar donations to charities of her choice?

Mia has been scribbling down notes and ideas into a little notebook she’s started to carry with her, but she hasn’t said the words yet.

Sienna has to fight a smile every time she sees Mia hunched over the notebook, so focused and diligent—pen in hand, teeth pressed into her lower lip. She’d probably take the same approach herself. She appreciates that Mia is being so cautious about her next wishes, even as the thought makes restlessness stir inside her. This can’t last forever. She might as well get it over with as quickly as possible, like she usually does. It’s easier. It’s safer.

Three weeks after their first meeting, Sienna materializes in the old theater’s cloakroom right as Mia walks inside.

Mia is barely even startled. “Not here,” she says, pained.

Sienna looks around. The room looks nothing like any of the places she’s been with Mia before. “Are we in the theater?”

“Yeah. We’re getting a tour before my mom signs the papers.”

If even the cloakroom looks like this—dark red, ornamental gold, a polished-wood counter—Sienna can guess at how the rest of the theater looks. Not bad. It even *smells* fancy.

Mia goes on, “My mom wanted my grandma and me to see the place. They’re busy talking about some boring business things and my mom’s

showing off the invitation flyers she had printed, so I wandered off, but they'll expect me back soon."

By now, none of that surprises Sienna. Of course Mia would wander, stuck in her own mind. Of course Mia's mother would want to share with her loved ones the moment she signs her years-long dream into being. And of course Mia's family would care enough to want Mia around.

Sienna abandons the thoughts. She's here for a reason.

"Know your second wish yet?" She's asked it so often these past weeks that the question slides off her tongue.

"I'm sorry for taking so long. I just … want to think it through. Properly. It's a big deal."

"I know. It's fine."

"It doesn't sound fine."

"It's fine."

Mia hesitates. "You sound angry. I know you want this over with."

"That's just how I sound." Sienna is not sure whether the joke comes across. "It's fine. Really. As long as I'm bound to you, I can't become indebted to anyone else. That you're taking your time means I don't have to worry about anyone else doing me favors. I went to visit my parents."

"You don't live with them? I thought you were my age."

"I am. Seventeen." She smiles wryly. "Try living with your parents when they can't show you kindness."

Sienna's parents meant well. They loved her. They simply learned to love other things, too: helping friends, wealth, traveling the world, bringing down business rivals, speaking a new language every week, bulldozing the neighbor's home to build a swimming pool …

Sienna fulfilled dozens of wishes for her parents before pleading with them to wish an independent life for her, away from them and away from their wishes. An apartment of her own. Steady cash flow. No one bothering her about taxes or going to school.

Sienna and her parents still talk. But only when she's bound to someone else.

"A break from having to be careful is nice," she finally says. "It doesn't normally last this long."

"Then … why are you impatient for me to make my wishes?"

Sienna searches for the words. Her left hand twitches by her side as she thinks, tapping her fingertips to her thumb. It's not that people haven't asked before; she just hasn't wanted to answer before.

She doesn’t want Mia to think she’s angry, though.

She doesn’t want Mia to feel guilty, either, even though she’s not sure why. Maybe it’s because Sienna thinks she might not have anything to worry about from Mia’s next two wishes.

And that’s a nice change of pace.

“I’m impatient because I want all this to be over,” she admits. “I can’t change other people’s free will, but my own doesn’t seem to matter. I have to fulfill every wish. Even the bad ones. I have to break up happy marriages over a stalker’s jealousy. Kill people for inheritances or convenience or politics or pettiness. Arrange the success of organizations and people I hate. Nudge a girl toward saying yes to a date with a boy who’s got bad intentions. With nearly unlimited power, even the nicest people, they…” She’s talking too much. This arrangement is not about her. She needs to explain herself and be done with it. “I can hide from people, but not for long. Even if I stick to my apartment, I have to respond to kindnesses over the internet and phone. And I keep thinking: I should go back outside. Maybe there’s a goal I need to reach. If I keep going long enough—if I fulfill enough wishes—the curse might end.”

Mia watches her with wide eyes. Their gazes meet, but Sienna can’t hold it for longer than a second—she never can. The eye contact is so present and so piercing it nearly hurts.

She keeps it up just long enough to notice Mia’s eyes are deep and brown and pretty. Just short enough to leave her wanting more.

Then Sienna averts her eyes, studying first the coatracks, then her own hand, still tap-tap-tapping fingers to her thumb in turn.

“Mia! Where’d you go?” Her mom’s voice rings out from deeper in the theater.

“Shit, I’m sorry,” Mia says to Sienna.

“Go. I’ll sneak out.”

“Do you want to come?”

“On the tour?”

“Yeah. I can say we were texting and you were in the neighborhood, so I invited you.”

“I…”

Sienna shouldn’t be receiving kindnesses.

She’s supposed to be the one repaying them.

“It might be nice to see a good wish in action. Right?” Mia smiles.

And with that smile, Sienna is all in.

* * *

That night is the first night Mia calls for Sienna.

She materializes in the dark of Mia's bedroom. The moonlight slants through the window, turning the blue tones of the room cool and gray.

"It worked," Mia says.

"Told you it would." Sienna stands near the door, hands in the pockets of her scuffed zip-up hoodie.

"I was wondering…" Mia sits on the bed in drawstring shorts and a baggy, low-cut top. "I can't wish that you never met the old man, can I?"

"Did you watch *Wishmaster* or something? No: I can't change history."

Her lips quirk up. "I can't straight-up wish for you to be free, either, *Aladdin* style?"

"My parents already tried." Sienna is smiling, too. Somehow.

"What about seeing the old man again? Making him lift the curse? I know you talked about free will, but this could just be a little nudge…"

"My parents tried that, too. It didn't work. He never showed."

If that was all Mia wanted to ask, Sienna should probably leave. But the way Mia is sitting there on the bed—she looks so *defeated*. All hunched and unsure.

Alone.

Maybe Sienna can stay for a little bit. She's tempted to go for the desk chair, which has become her permanent perch whenever she's visiting. At first she'd chosen it because she wanted to keep her distance from Mia.

And then she'd chosen the chair because she *didn't* want to keep her distance anymore, but knew she ought to.

Before she can change her mind, Sienna bypasses the desk chair. She wrestles away the discomfort that needles her the second she steps into new territory around Mia's bed. She kicks off her shoes, unzips her hoodie, and climbs onto the mattress beside Mia.

"Did you finish studying for that economics test you were worried about?" Sienna draws up her legs and tries to sound casual—like her heart isn't thudding from making this decision, like she's not feeling sudden goose bumps prick against her clothes, like this is a normal thing. Talking about homework in the middle of the night, side by side. On a girl's bed. On Mia's bed.

"No," Mia admits. "Got distracted by the new *Ace Attorney* game."

Two manga titles lie in the sheets by Sienna's side. A folded flyer acts as a bookmark, sticking out from the pages of one book. She flicks at the corner with her thumbnail—*flick*, *flick*—and wonders whether her voice sounds as

unsteady as she feels. "*Ace Attorney*. There's another wish for the list. You could get any future games in the series early. The Pokémon ones, too."

"There wouldn't be any fan databases or walk-throughs online yet! How am I supposed to choose a starter without knowing what it'll evolve into?" Mia keeps her laugh soft, probably so she won't wake her brother in the next bedroom over.

"I have no clue what that even means." Sienna is still playing with the flyer. It helps her think. Otherwise, she might focus on the coolness of Mia's silky sheets or the manga title poking her leg or the rhythm of Mia's breathing right beside her, which—the moment Sienna stops flicking the paper—will be the only sound whispering into the quiet of the night.

Flick, flick.

Sienna nods at Mia's notebook on her nightstand, the one she's been writing wish ideas into. "Another option: Want to meet a boyfriend who actually knows something about Pokémon so you can discuss that?"

"I don't want a boyfriend."

"Fair enough. But what about…" Her mind searches for other wishes and comes up blank.

Sienna meant what she'd told Mia in that cloakroom earlier today: She likes having a break. She doesn't mind if Mia takes a while to come up with her wishes. In the back of her mind, though, she's still scrambling for other suggestions to make. Mia will have to make the wishes at *some* point, and once she does, that's it: Sienna will go back to her apartment and back to avoiding contact until the next kindness bumps into her regardless.

It's a life that doesn't involve Mia.

It *can't* involve Mia, because Mia is nothing *but* kindness, and Sienna doesn't think she can bear to see that kindness turn to greed.

Mia shifts on the bed, facing Sienna. The mattress dips from their combined weight. Her knee brushes past Sienna's leg. Sienna jolts, but makes herself stay rooted to the bed. Her goose bumps were just starting to settle down. Now they rush over her skin like a waterfall. She tries to focus on the words coming from Mia's mouth: "What if I don't make a third wish?"

Sienna's hand abruptly stills, the flyer now half sticking from the book. "What?"

"You said that as long as you're indebted to me, you're free. Sort of. What if you *stay* indebted? If I make my second wish, but never make a third wish, you wouldn't have to react to anyone else's kindnesses. Right?"

She's still trying. Sienna wishes she'd stop. "What if I'm close? What if

I'm only a handful of wishes away from lifting the curse?"

"What if you're *not*? You shouldn't have been cursed in the first place. You were a traumatized kid. You don't owe anyone this."

"But…" She shakes her head. "My parents tried that already."

"It didn't work?"

"They knew the third wish was still waiting for them. They cashed it in, sooner or later. They thought it would be a waste to ignore." And then they would perform another kindness right away and hold back their third wish, promising that *this* time, it would be for good. "It wouldn't be fair to either of us." As much as Sienna tries to sound casual, she knows she's losing the battle. Her voice sounds flat even to her. "You would know you only need to snap your finger to solve any problem in your path. What if your brother goes missing, or you get some fatal illness? You'd have to ignore the solution you know is there, or break your promise to me. And—I'd just be waiting for that to happen." She pauses to squeeze back the sudden lump in her throat. "Thank you for trying. I mean it. But it's fine. You could do a lot of good with your other wishes, whether it's for yourself or for the world."

"Maybe. But whoever comes after me might do a lot of bad." Mia shifts so that she's sitting on her knees.

Sienna doesn't know what else to say. She knows how to avoid small kindnesses—how to keep a snarl on her face and put people off right from the start—but she has no experience fending off kindness of this magnitude.

No one tries hard enough to reach this point.

Somehow, Mia slipped past all her defenses. The realization leaves Sienna feeling both vulnerable and—in a strange, surprising way—*grateful*. She can put down her weapons. She can breathe.

It's almost enough to make her forget what Mia is offering.

Mia's eyes glint in the dark. "My wishes aren't worth your freedom. I want to help."

Sienna looks away, at Mia's shoulder, except Mia is wearing that low-cut pajama top and it might seem like Sienna is looking somewhere more central than her shoulder, and—

Mia leans in. Just a little.

Sienna jolts as a knee presses into her side a second time. Now it doesn't seem like an accident. She looks back up.

"I want to…" Mia seems to hesitate. Her voice is rough; her eyes drop to Sienna's lips.

Sienna's breath sticks in her throat as she realizes what's happening. For a

moment, she's frozen still. She wants to scramble away from Mia, back to the desk chair, back to safety.

Instead, she lets herself breathe again. She leans in. Trembling. Slowly, carefully, hopefully.

The kiss is short. They knock teeth. Sienna wonders about her breath.

But she also tastes Mia's mint toothpaste and her own cherry ChapStick. She feels Mia's hand on hers. And after the kiss, their faces hovering inches apart, she can study Mia up close. Her lips, her skin, stolen glimpses of her eyes. Her nervous smile.

"I've never done that before," Mia says quietly.

"I have." Pause. "This time was better."

And the second kiss is better still.

This—her and Mia—it's not a smart thing to be doing. Sienna knows that. And part of her is relieved when they pull away. This needs to end. She needs to leave. She doesn't know what any of this means. She needs to—

Mia whispers:

"What if my second wish is to forget we ever met?" Her breath is still shallow; her cheeks still look flushed; the taste of her lips still hovers on Sienna's.

Sienna licks it away. Blinks. She must have misheard that. "I—What?" Her voice is raw.

"If I don't know there's a final wish waiting for me … I won't have to face the decision over whether to use it. And you'd never have to worry that I'd break my promise."

Sienna's mind tumbles over itself to try to keep up. She's still placing the kiss, still fighting the instinct to scramble out of the room. She watches Mia helplessly.

"It would work," Mia says. "Wouldn't it?"

It could. It might. But—

"But I don't want you to forget about me." The words sound childish. This is Mia's wish, Mia's decision. Sienna's only role is to grant it. It's not about her. It's not about—"I'd still know about the curse," she blurts out. It might be enough to convince Mia. "I'd still feel trapped. And … and I'd wonder whether I had ruined my chances of *really* being free. It's not worth it."

And I'd miss you.

"What if we both forget?" Mia says softly. "You could believe you finished your wishes and the curse is lifted."

"I…" Sienna falters. Her mind is spinning too much to keep arguing. She

looks down, away, like it'll help her think. Her fists grip Mia's sheets. *No more wishes. No more curse*. She can't unscramble any words past those six.

For weeks, Sienna's instincts have yelled at her to stay away from Mia, to wrap this up fast and move one step closer to freedom. She fought those instincts—stubbornly, selfishly. It's why she stayed for dinner, why she went on the theater tour, why she and Mia are sitting here on this bed, inches away, with Mia's knee pressing into her thigh.

Right now, her instincts beg her to choose freedom over Mia. And she can't keep fighting them.

This close to the possibility of *no more curse* … She hadn't realized how badly she craved it until it came within reach. Daydreaming and hoping hurt too much. She'd pushed it away.

If Sienna forgets about Mia, she won't miss her, either.

She nods. Before she can change her mind, she says one final, quiet word:

"Okay."

Mia leans in, one hand on Sienna's side, and kisses her again. Briefly. Like a good-bye.

Then she says the words: "I wish…"

And there's nothing left for either of them to say.

She yanks up her hoodie and sneaks outside before the wish takes complete effect. By the time she's halfway down the street, she straightens.

She finds herself smiling.

"It's over," she whispers to herself. Her memories of tonight replay in her head again and again. The old man hadn't changed a hair from when she'd last seen him all those years ago.

"Hope you learned your lesson," he'd said, a wry smile on his face. "You did good."

She would've spat at his feet if it wouldn't have risked another eight years of curse. It didn't matter, anyway. He could say anything he wanted to say.

She's done.

It's over.

She hugs herself, a happy sob in her throat, and walks home alone.

MIA

The theater grand opening is loud and friendly.

Mia's mother wears a glimmering silk dress; her father and brother wear identical blue suits in vastly different sizes.

Mia herself wears a polka-dot dress that feels awkward, but that her

grandmother swears looks great on her. The two of them stay near the walls. Her grandmother is clapping along with the music and laughing, for once friendly instead of fussing. They lean in to hear each other over the noise, beam at Mia's mother when she takes the mic for a speech, grab snacks from the waiter's plate as he passes by. Mia takes extra for her brother.

It's fun, and she's happy for her mom, but being the only one her age is awkward. Her mom said she could invite friends. They both knew it was a pointless offer.

By the end of the night, Mia finds herself wishing she'd brought her Nintendo Switch. She'd have been able to hide in the cloakroom until the party wound down.

She offers to look after her brother instead, to free up her parents and grandmother to enjoy the night.

When she lifts him up, her brother is half-asleep, but he's thankfully skipped the crying stage. She holds him close, whispering jokes in his ear. His smiles, and his mumbled responses into her shoulder slow the farther they trail away from the noise of the party.

The theater is beautiful.

It'll be even more beautiful when her mom fills these halls again. Mia imagines flyers on the walls, kids laughing onstage during show rehearsals, one group learning the words to *Chicago* and another studying *Hamilton*. She imagines sometimes joining them, and other times doing her homework in the library while her mother works long hours.

Everything has gone so smoothly these weeks; that future feels within reach. It's a nice thing to imagine.

Her brother falls asleep.

Mia winds through the empty halls. Her arms grow tired, but she doesn't want to return yet. She nudges open a door. Plush red seats to her left, a stage on her right—

And there, on the edge of the stage, sits a girl.

"I don't think you're supposed to be back here." Mia keeps her voice low for her brother's sake.

She walks closer. The girl is her age, Mia thinks, with loose black hair spilling around her shoulders. She's pretty, even if her face looks like she has no idea what to do with herself. She sways slowly back and forth as though moving along to music, though Mia doesn't spot any earphones.

She does spot something else. The girl has a Switch in her lap.

The girl's eyes flick up at Mia. "No one told me I couldn't be. Are you

looking after your … brother?”

Mia appreciates that she’s keeping her voice down. “Yeah. I wanted to let my mom enjoy the party.”

“That’s a kind thing to do.”

“Oh,” she says, unsure. *Kind?* Who talks like that? “Are you with the serving staff?”

“No, I was at the party. Just not for long.”

“It got a little boring,” Mia admits.

The girl frowns at the Switch in her lap as she talks. For the first time, Mia notices the white streaks in her hair. “I’m not sure why I came. It’s kinda rude to come and eat all your food when I don’t even know anyone here. It looked nice, I guess. I didn’t have anything else to do.”

“Did your parents drag you along?”

“No. I found an invitation in my hoodie pocket a while back. It’s kind of weird. Not sure where it came from.”

Mia shifts her brother in her arms. He’s getting heavier by the minute. She wants to sit, but she’s not sure whether she’s supposed to. Given the way the girl isn’t even looking at Mia, she doesn’t seem that interested in talking. “Yeah, that’s weird,” Mia says slowly. She’s got to be missing something. She should just go before she says something embarrassing that makes the girl realize Mia’s cluelessness. She knows she shouldn’t care what strangers think of her. She does anyway.

Especially when they’re this pretty.

“I should…” Mia nods at the door, already taking a step toward it.

“I’ve been trying to play this game,” the girl blurts out. “I was looking at the device in the store yesterday. I’ve never really played these things, but … this one made me curious. A salesgirl saw me staring. She did a whole pitch. It sounded interesting enough so, I don’t know, I bought it.” The girl holds up the Switch, flashing a screen that looks like she might be playing *Ace Attorney*. “I don’t think I really understand it yet.”

Mia stands there a few moments, not knowing whether to follow her earlier instinct to leave, or to pounce on the opening like she’s itching to do.

Her mom and grandmother do always say Mia should make more friends. And the girl looks lonely.

Like maybe she could use some kindness.

Mia shifts her brother’s position so they can sit on the stage beside the girl. “I’m Mia.”

“Sienna.”

“I know that game, actually. I could help if you want.”
Sienna smiles. It’s slight, but it lights up her face.
Mia finds herself smiling back.
“Yeah,” Sienna says. “I’d like that.”

About the Authors

MARIEKE NIJKAMP (editor) was born and raised in the Netherlands. A lifelong student of stories, language, and ideas, she holds degrees in philosophy, history, and medieval studies. She is a storyteller, a dreamer, a globe-trotter, and a geek. She was a founding member of We Need Diverse Books and the founder of DiversifYA. Marieke is the author of the number one *New York Times*–bestselling novel *This Is Where It Ends* and *Before I Let Go*, and contributed stories to *The Radical Element* and *Feral Youth* anthologies. You can sign up for email updates here.

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FOX BENWELL is a perpetual student, writer, adventurer, and wannabe knight, who holds degrees in international education and writing for young people, and believes in the power of both to change the world. He's currently examining disability representation in young adult fiction for his PhD. Fox's debut novel, *The Last Leaves Falling*, garnered five starred reviews, got named a USBBY Outstanding International Book, and was longlisted for the Carnegie Medal. He is also the author of *Kaleidoscope Song*.

KEAH BROWN is the creator of theb highly popular #DisabledAndCute hashtag. She is a reader, not a fighter. A lover and a writer. She has a BA in journalism from the State University of New York at Fredonia. Keah is a senior entertainment writer at ClicheMag.com. Her work has appeared in *Teen Vogue*, ESPNW, *Harper's Bazaar*, and Lenny Letter, among other publications. Keah loves TV, and she tweets at @Keah_Maria about cheesecake and how she should be writing. Her debut essay collection will be published by Atria Books.

DHONIELLE CLAYTON was born in the suburbs of Washington, DC, and spent her childhood Saturdays at the comic book store with her father and most evenings hiding beneath her grandmother's dining room table with a stack of books. She earned a BA in English at Wake Forest University, was an English teacher for three years, and earned a master's in children's and young adult literature from Hollins University. She then moved to NYC, where she earned her MFA at the New School's MFA Program. She is a cofounder of CAKE Literary, a literary development studio committed to bringing diversity to high-concept content, and she's the COO of We Need Diverse Books. Dhonielle is the author of *Tiny Pretty Things* and *Shiny Broken Pieces* (both of which she cowrote with Sona Charaipotra), as well as her debut, *The Belles*.

CORINNE DUYVIS spends her days writing sci-fi and fantasy novels and getting her geek on whenever possible. She was born in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, where she still resides. Her fantasy novel, *Otherbound*, earned four starred reviews and won the Bisexual Book Award; her sci-fi novel, *On the Edge of Gone*, earned three starred reviews and was named a Kirkus Best Book of 2016. Corinne coined the #ownvoices hashtag and is a cofounder of Disability in Kidlit, a website dedicated to disabled characters in children's literature. She also wrote *Guardians of the Galaxy: Collect Them All* and contributed to the *Clockwork Phoenix* and *Defying Doomsday* anthologies.

HEIDI HEILIG grew up in Hawaii, where she rode horses and raised peacocks, and then she moved to New York City and grew up even more, as one tends to do. Her favorite thing, outside of writing, is travel, and she has haggled for rugs in Morocco, hiked the trails of the Ko'olau Valley, and huddled in a tent in Africa while lions roared in the dark. She holds an MFA from New York University in Musical Theater Writing, of all things, and she's

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KODY KEPLINGER was born and raised in small-town western Kentucky, where she began her writing career after penning the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestseller *The DUFF* at age seventeen. Now a major motion picture, her first novel was chosen as a YALSA Top Ten Quick Pick for Reluctant Young Readers and a *Romantic Times* Top Pick. Kody has since written other books for both young adult and middle grade readers, such as *Shut Out*, *A Midsummer's Nightmare*, *The Swift Boys and Me*, *Lying Out Loud*, *Run*, and *That's Not What Happened*. When she isn't writing, she enjoys playing tabletop role-playing games, cuddling with her service dog, and, yes, tandem cycling. Kody is also a cofounder of Disability in Kidlit and a teacher at the Gotham Writers Workshops in NYC.

KATHERINE LOCKE lives and writes outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where she's ruled by her feline overlords and her addiction to chai lattes. A graduate of Allegheny College, she's worked on nuclear weapons abolition activism, lead poisoning prevention, mushroom farm food safety and worker safety programs, and literacy advocacy. She secretly believes most stories are fairy tales in disguise. Katherine's novels include *The Girl with the Red Balloon*, which won a Sydney Taylor Honor, *Second Position*, *Turning Pointe*, and *Finding Center.*

KARUNA RIAZI's debut middle grade novel, *The Gauntlet*, was published to great acclaim. She was raised in New York, the eldest of her siblings in a large family. In addition to pursuing a bachelor's degree in English literature from Hofstra University, she is also an active online diversity spokesperson, blogger, and publishing intern. Karuna enjoys baking, tea, K-dramas, and writing.

FRANCISCO X. STORK was born in Mexico. He moved to El Paso, Texas, with his adoptive father and mother when he was nine. He attended Spring Hill College, Harvard University, and Columbia Law School. He worked as an attorney for thirty-three years before retiring in 2015. He is married and has two grown children and one beautiful granddaughter. His favorite books

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KAYLA WHALEY lives outside Atlanta, Georgia, where she buys way too many books and even more crafting supplies. She is currently pursuing an MFA in creative nonfiction at the University of Tampa, and is a graduate of the Clarion Writers' Workshop. Whether she's writing fiction or nonfiction, she tends to focus on disability, sexuality, and the body. Her work has appeared on Catapult, The Toast, The Establishment, and Book Riot; and in *Michigan Quarterly Review* and *Uncanny Magazine*, among others venues. She is also a senior editor at Disability in Kidlit.

KRISTINE WYLLYS was born in the north and spent the first half of her life in a city full of college kids and dying automotive plants outside Detroit. These days, she writes and dances around a dusty kitchen in the south with a kid on each hip and the boy she fell in love with at fifteen and calls Betty. Loud, brownish, feminist, geeky, and introverted, Kristine writes gritty contemporary romances featuring girls who like drinking and won't sit down and shut up and the boys who love them for it.

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